

# REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

*Form Approved*  
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<b>1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY)</b> 29-03-2018		<b>2. REPORT TYPE</b> Master of Military Studies		<b>3. DATES COVERED (From - To)</b> SEP 2017-JUN 2018	
<b>4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE</b> The US Policy Towards the Syrian Conflict: Continuity or Change?				<b>5a. CONTRACT NUMBER</b> N/A	
				<b>5b. GRANT NUMBER</b> N/A	
				<b>5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER</b> N/A	
<b>6. AUTHOR(S)</b> Aldmour, Ashraf, T, Lieutenant Colonel, Jordanian Armed Forces				<b>5d. PROJECT NUMBER</b> N/A	
				<b>5e. TASK NUMBER</b> N/A	
				<b>5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER</b> N/A	
<b>7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b> USMC Command and Staff College Marine Corps University 2076 South Street Quantico, VA 22134-5068				<b>8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER</b> N/A	
<b>9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b>				<b>10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)</b> Dr. Amin Tarzi	
				<b>11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)</b> N/A	
<b>12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT</b> Approved for public release, distribution unlimited.					
<b>13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES</b>					
<b>14. ABSTRACT</b> The Paper aims to review the US foreign policy options towards the Syrian conflict, especially during Obama presidency. While the US adopted less assertive policies, they remained similar to previous US administrations in terms of their realistic approach. President Obama followed a hybrid pattern of realistic but carefully calculated choices in Syria, because the US was predisposed by several variables or determinants that heavily influenced not only US polices but all stakeholders in the conflict.					
<b>15. SUBJECT TERMS</b> United States Foreign Policy, Syria, The Syrian Conflict, The Middle East					
<b>16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:</b>			<b>17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT</b> UU	<b>18. NUMBER OF PAGES</b>	<b>19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON</b> USMC Command and Staff College
<b>a. REPORT</b> Unclass	<b>b. ABSTRACT</b> Unclass	<b>c. THIS PAGE</b> Unclass			<b>19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (include area code)</b> (703) 784-3330 (Admin Office)

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Quantico, Virginia 22134-5068

MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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**THE US POLICY TOWARDS THE SYRIAN CONFLICT:  
CONTINUITY OR CHANGE?**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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## **Preface**

The US politics in the Middle East have been fascinating in light of the complex geopolitics across the region. My personal interest in this topic extends from my background as a Jordanian Officer, and a desire to better understand how the conflict has affected my country. The Syrian conflict has affected Jordan in many way, to include approximate 1.3 million refugees that have crossed our borders. The multifaceted dimensions of this conflict has provided Jordan a host of challenges that are impacting the lives of all Jordanians. While there are no easy answers to the many challenges, my hope is to provide some new perspectives on the difficulties my country and the region face.

This master's thesis would not have been possible if it were not for my mentor Dr. Amin Tarzi and my faculty advisors who provided keen insights, sage guidance, and challenging perspectives. I in their debt for the mentorship and dedication to helping me complete this paper. I also want to thank my beautiful wife Shayma and my wonderful children Yousef and Salma for their patience and understanding as I worked to complete this demanding task.

# 1. Introduction

The civil war in Syria has entered its eighth year with no feasible end in sight. Over the last two years the Syrian regime has started to consolidate its power in many areas of the country, especially in the north and the east.<sup>1</sup> Such steady progress could not have been achieved without the direct support of Russia and Iran. In fact, the Russian military involvement in the conflict in 2015 has not only prevented the collapse of the Assad regime, but it also enabled it to move into the offensive and restore key strategic cities.<sup>2</sup> Simultaneously, the dramatic rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham\* (ISIS) in mid-2014 has shifted the world's calculus in Syria. Most key regional and international players, including the United States, have shifted their agendas to fighting violent extremist organizations operating in Syria. Such a shift has even cemented Assad's position and slowly granted it an indispensable role in any settlement of the conflict and beyond.

While the US adopted more assertive policies in several regional conflicts like Iraq and Libya, the case was different for Syria. The aim of this paper is to understand why the US adopted less assertive policies in Syria, thus avoiding direct military intervention contrary to the Iraqi case. This paper also reviews whether this pattern of US foreign policy towards the Syrian conflict represents continuity or change.

Although the US adopted a less assertive foreign policy toward Syria, especially during President Barack Obama administration, its foreign policy remained similar to previous US administrations in terms of its realistic approach. However, such policies have been directly dictated by the complex circumstances of the Syrian conflict. There are a number of key factors that limited the US options in Syria and forced the US to follow certain policies. First, the complexities of any direct military intervention; Second, the absence of international consensus on

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\* Sham: The region bordering the eastern Mediterranean Sea, usually known as the Levant or the region of Syria: Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, Cyprus and the Turkish Hatay.

Syria; Third, the rise of violent extremist organizations (VEOs) in the country; and finally, the absence of credible choice to the Assad regime. These were not full departures from previous administrations policies, but the circumstances on the ground played a major role in shaping the US policies in Syria since the eruption of the conflict until the end of President Obama's administration.

This paper will start with exploring the US policies in the Middle East region in the 21st century, focusing mainly on President's George W. Bush administration between 2000-2008 and his successor President Barack Obama's administration that lasted until early 2017. This paper will elaborate on the different approaches that Bush pursued, especially in Afghanistan and later in Iraq. Then, it will explore Obama's responses to the aftermath of the so-called "Arab Spring" and the US policies towards the events in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. After that, the paper will highlight key developments of the Syrian conflict and the US response to them, examining the US policy objectives, and US policy options that were available at that time. Following this, the paper will explore why the Obama administration had made its policy choices and what were the main determinants that shaped such policies. Finally the paper will conclude with possible policy recommendations that current US policy-maker can undertake in order to circumvent the human suffering stemming from the conflict and better secure US national interests in Syria and the Middle East region.

## **2. US Policy in the Middle East in the 21st Century**

The US assumed a prominent role in the Middle East region since the end of World War II, driven by maintaining its influence and securing the flow of oil, as two key determinants to US national interests at that time.<sup>3</sup> The Cold War mindset dominated the political scene in the region through most of the 20th century where the US relentlessly tried to contain any Soviet expansion

in the region. But with the advent of the 21st century and following the 9/11 attacks, the US galvanized new policies toward the region dominated by more interventionist realistic approaches in order to eradicate the rise of totalitarian Islamist movements that caused the horrible attacks on the American soil in 2001. The US surmised that its policy objectives could only be achieved through two choices; launching a global campaign on terrorism and imposing its version of democratizing the Middle East. As Paul Jabber argues, “confronting and ultimately stamping out 'terrorism with a global reach' has become the single most important objective of US national policy for the foreseeable future.”<sup>4</sup>

The protracted wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, compounded with the indefinite global campaign on terrorism have clearly reflected interventionist policies that President Bush assumed in his choices towards the Middle East. However, the fragile situation in Afghanistan, the widespread instability in Iraq, and the failed process of democratization proved that these policies did not achieve US national interests. In fact, they have hindered them, and increased anti-US sentiment in the region, which consequently further endangered US national security. In the same vein, the US-led campaign of democratization and political reforms in the region has not gained any momentum either.<sup>5</sup> As the political science professor at the British University in Egypt Gamal Selim bluntly puts it, “The US democracy-promotion agenda did not reflect a genuine desire by the Bush Administration. Rather, the democratization of the Arab world, while being given more emphasis in official rhetoric, remained a secondary item on US foreign policy, which continued to be centered on seeking avenues to preserve the stability of pro-American Arab authoritarian regimes.”<sup>6</sup> It is clearly that the US policies favored stability rather than democracy.

In 2009 President Obama inherited two open conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, with no feasible outcomes in sight. However, unlike his predecessor, President Obama adopted a different approach and there was a clear departure of previous traditional US policies. Obama’s doctrine was

based on ending US military involvement in these two conflicts, paving the way for gradual US disengagement from the troubled region of the Middle East, meanwhile securing US national interests. As the American journalist Jeffrey Goldberg, the editor-in-chief of *The Atlantic* puts it, “In Obama’s view, a very different strategy was required: a non-aggressive, multilateral, and non-interventionist approach.”<sup>7</sup>

The unpredictable waves of revolutionary uprisings of the so-called Arab Spring which swept the Middle East region in 2011, created a dilemma for US policies in the region. The US was at a crossroads between balancing its traditional support to the status quo autocratic regimes that would preserve relative stability and best satisfy US national interests, or supporting the popular movements and the calls for real democracy that the US long championed for, but with ambiguous future outcomes.<sup>8</sup> While caught by surprise, the Obama administration dealt with these strategic events on a case-by-case basis.

In the case of Tunisia and Egypt, the US oriented itself with the popular movements; however, it worked with other partners to maintain the power structures and avoided a political and security vacuum to secure US national interests.<sup>9</sup> Conversely, the case in Libya was different. The US, through NATO, launched an air campaign to put an end to Muammar Qaddafi’s regime and end the killing of innocent civilians. While Obama intentionally avoided a US-led operation in Libya, the US administration favored leading from behind policy by which NATO and other regional countries took the lead in this operation after obtaining the legal authorization from the UN Security Council under the principle of Responsibility to Protect. As the Portuguese political scholars de Pinho Ceuand and Pinto Ferreira argue, “Obama emphasized that his decision on Libya was based on what has become his foreign-policy doctrine: relying on international consensus and multilateral action to bring about military intervention with a limited American role.”<sup>10</sup> This is the case of Libya, but in other Arab Spring countries the US policies were different.

In Yemen, the US condemned the violent response to the protesters by Ali Abdallah Saleh's regime. As the level of violence escalated in the country, the US supported a Saudi-led initiative of power transition in Yemen. However, such a transition did not bring any genuine stability, and later the country was dragged into a bitter civil war with sectarian overtones.<sup>11</sup>

One can argue that the US response to the Arab Spring has been hesitant, indecisive, and sometimes contradictory,<sup>12</sup> where the Obama administration did not preserve US primacy in the region, nor it achieve US ideals of democracy and good governance. But a deeper look into the situation, suggests that such heavy-weight events with unpredictable outcomes required more cautious policies towards these developments. It was in the best interests of the US to deal with these events on a case-by-case basis.<sup>13</sup> Examining the quite different US responses to the events in each Arab Spring country, it became clear that Obama adopted a realistic approach in which he sought to secure US national interests and avoid state collapse through securing power transition structures that would presumably maintain good relations with the West, and more importantly with the United States.

### **3. US Policy towards the Conflict in Syria**

#### **3.1 Conflict Overview**

Amidst the regional upheavals known as the Arab Spring that swept many countries in 2011, the Syrian uprising started when peaceful protestors in Dar'a city called for more freedoms and reforms.<sup>14</sup> However, the Syrian regime used excessive military power to suppress these protests. As a result, anti-regime sentiment expanded into many other parts of the country, leading to a bitter armed conflict between President Bashar al-Assad and his supporters on one side, and Syrian opposition and its supporters on the other. As the conflict prolonged, the country became locked into a bitter conflict, both from Syria and from outside. Worse still, the conflict turned into a proxy war between regional and international rivalries, where it became a battleground to flex

their muscles and influence.<sup>15</sup>

As the conflict enters its eighth year with no peaceful settlement in sight, it has resulted in the death of nearly half a million according to Congressional Research Service publication on the Syrian conflict in 2017. It has also forced over five million Syrians to flee into neighboring countries. In addition, more than six million Syrians, which are internally displaced and in desperate need of humanitarian assistance.

The conflict's intensity and complexity have reached unprecedented proportions, causing greater chaos and instability in Syria and subsequent spill over into neighboring countries. The ongoing conflict empowered many VEOs to flourish and establish safe havens in Syria, threatening not only Syria, but the general security and stability in many parts of the world as well.<sup>16</sup> Bearing in mind that the Syrian regime possessed, at that time, huge stockpiles of chemical weapons, which Assad did not hesitate to use against his own people, or these same weapons of mass destruction (WMD) ending up in the wrong hands. Additionally, the conflict dramatically sharpened the Sunnis-Shia divide, igniting further sectarian-based hatred and violence.<sup>17</sup> Such complex situations have plunged the country into a fierce war creating a multifaceted regional crisis, hindering all international efforts to reach a peaceful settlement despite the ongoing UN-led initiatives. The country's descent into brutal war created a multidimensional regional crisis.

### **3.2 US Interests in Syria**

As a global power, the US had longstanding interests in the Middle East region since the end of the Second World War. In the words of the American professor of International Studies at the Air War College David Sorenson, "US eastern Mediterranean security objectives include sustaining regional stability, avoiding havens for terrorists, preventing weapons of mass destruction proliferation, supporting Israeli security, encouraging economic growth and promoting democratization."<sup>18</sup> While one may argue that the US succeeded in achieving some of these

interests or has achieved partial success in certain objectives, others would contend to argue the opposite. Relatively speaking, over the last two decades the US pursued these interests.

As for the Syrian case, the conflict generated several challenges and security threats to the US national security and its interests in the region as a whole.<sup>19</sup> These challenges include: First, the potential proliferation of WMD and the willingness of other parties to use them in this conflict or in the future; second, the rise and empowerment of VEOs; third, the proliferation of arms and weapons within the hands of several rival non-state actors; finally, the associated risks with regional and international intervention in the conflict of Syria, especially the increasing involvement of Russia and Iran in the conflict.

### **3.3 What Were the US Options?**

To address these challenges and threats, the US had few options in dealing with the unfolding events in Syria. The policy options that were available to the US were, either intervening militarily similar to previous cases in Iraq or to some extent in Libya with all its consequences or supporting the negotiated talks sponsored by the UN which would stop the horrific atrocities and bring about a sustained ceasefire and pave the way for transitional government. Another available policy option was to focus on fighting VEOs in Syria and Iraq, alongside containing the conflict from spilling over outside Syria, and manage the conflict until both sides reach exhaustion, then strongly commit to negotiated peace.

In dealing with the conflict in Syria, President Obama wanted to keep his promises of reducing the US military forward presence in the region. However, the President was under enormous pressure to act decisively to reduce violence levels and alleviate humanitarian suffering. At the same time, the US could not have stood still looking at the empowerment of VEOs taking advantage of the political and security vacuum in Syria and its neighboring Iraq. As the American counter-terrorism expert and NBR national security correspondent Greg Myre describes Obama's

policy on Syria, "Obama wanted to shrink the U.S. military footprint in Middle East, and resisted pressure to take military action in the wake of Syria's 2011 uprising. He never ordered an attack against the Syrian government, but Obama did launch the bombing campaign against the Islamic State as it rapidly expanded in 2014."<sup>20</sup> Therefore, in order to achieve such policies, President Obama had adopted a realistic, but less assertive policies that will be explained in the next section in more details. It's worthwhile mentioning that any kind of intervention for the Obama administration was a tuff sell, given the complex domestic political climate and the inter-administration rivalry.<sup>21</sup>

### **3.4 Main Features of the US Policy in Syria**

Since the eruption of the Syrian conflict in 2011, the US position has been very cautious similar to other US stances related to other Arab Spring countries; however, as the situation deteriorated, the US policy started to be more apparent. President Obama called for President Assad to step down in 2011, but Assad ignored all calls in this regard. As the conflict intensified in 2013, strong indicators pointed to the Syrian regime using chemical weapons against opposition-controlled populated areas several times, crossing red lines drawn earlier by President Obama.<sup>22</sup> As a response to mounting pressures on President Obama to take action in Syria, the US administration used a combination of military threats and diplomatic activities. For instance, the Assad regime agreed to dismantle its WMD arsenal after the US and Russia reached a last-minute deal, thus avoiding the country imminent US military intervention. According to the Georgetown International Affairs Journal, "the US diplomacy was nonetheless successful in the Syrian crisis because it mixed the use of threats with the use of incentives."<sup>23</sup> The journal continues to note that, "Such signaling strategies that mix incentives with threats are critical to maintaining the stability of US long-standing deterrent policies."<sup>24</sup> President Obama's use of incentives vs. threats policy

was a success and proved to be effectively working especially in negotiating with Russia on the removal of Assad chemical arsenal.

The US-Russian brokered chemical deal and the non-feasibility of military options have paved the way to launch peace talks between the belligerents sponsored by the United Nations. Since that time the US has focused its policy options in Syria on a negotiated settlement. As noted in the Congressional Research Service report in 2017, “The Obama Administration engaged from 2012 through 2017 in multilateral efforts to reach a negotiated settlement to the conflict that would result in Assad’s departure but preserve some elements of the Syrian government.”<sup>25</sup> Similar to this platform, the US was concerned with the empowerment of VEOs in Iraq and Syria. In order to contain and defeat these organizations, the US led an air campaign, which later developed into Operation Inherent Resolve, targeting ISIS leadership, infrastructure, and locations. Parallel to this operation, the US started to provide military assistance to several vetted opposition groups to fight these VEOs, especially in eastern and western parts of Syria.

On the political track, the US supported UN-led efforts to bring both parties to the negotiation table, and would eventually result in Assad’s departure, preserving some elements of the government structure. However, this track has not achieved a remarkable breakthrough since it was launched in 2012 due to many reasons, among them the insistence of the Assad regime to play a part in any future settlement in the country.

In mid-2014 ISIS, or Da'esh in Arabic, announced the establishment of an Islamic State after seizing large areas in eastern Syria and northern Iraq.<sup>26</sup> Such serious developments have forced the US to launch an air campaign under Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) to target ISIS infrastructure in Syria and Iraq with the participation of several countries. The main objective of this operation was to counter and defeat ISIS. As former US Central Command Gen. Lloyd Austin states, “This terrorist organization presents a very real threat to stability and security in Iraq and

Syria and other parts of the Central Region and beyond; and, it also poses a potential threat to the U.S. homeland and our core national interests in the region.”<sup>27</sup>

In 2018, and after more than four years in this operation, ISIS has lost most of its territories. Moreover, most of their capabilities and infrastructure have also been remarkably degraded. Despite this noteworthy progress against VEOs, the battle is far from being over. As the deputy director of the CSIS International Security Program (ISP) Melissa Dalton argues, “the US has compelling reasons to not only counter terrorist groups but also to address the broader factors that have enabled the rise of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) and al-Qaida's affiliate in Syria, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS).”<sup>28</sup> There are great accomplishments in degrading such terrorist organizations' capabilities, but at the larger context of addressing the root causes of terrorism, a better coordinated collateral cooperation is a key requirement for any progress.

Alongside with OIR, the US has militarily supported few factions of the Syrian opposition in order to confront ISIS. To achieve this end the US started a “Train and Equip” program for several vetted Syrian opposition groups in May 2015. Despite many setbacks, this program has empowered key opposition factions to expel ISIS fighters from many areas in northern and eastern Syria. In his remarks before a congressional hearing, former Defense Secretary Ashton Carter notes, “We know this program is essential: we need a partner on the ground in Syria to assure ISIL's lasting defeat. And, as training progresses, we are learning more about the opposition groups and building important relationships, which increases our ability to attract recruits and provides valuable intelligence for counter-ISIL operations.”<sup>29</sup> To achieve this mission, the US has deployed between 1000-2000 soldiers in eastern Syria to implement this program, especially to support the Kurdish forces to fight ISIS. As the end of the campaign against ISIS is in sight, the US has to decide how long to keep this military presence in Syria.<sup>30</sup>

In September 2015, amidst key setbacks for the forces of Assad regime and spread of terrorist groups in the country, Russia dramatically raised its military presence in Syria. The alleged mission of Russian forces was to fight terrorist groups; however, their mission was broader than that. For instance, Russian fighter jets launched an air campaign to target terrorist infrastructure. However, most of these strikes were focused on key Syrian opposition strongholds in northern Syria, while only a small portion of the campaign aimed at terrorist groups. The Russian's surprising and decisive military intervention in favor of the regime has been a game changer. Such intervention has empowered Assad forces to retake the initiative and enabled them to move into the offensive, where they managed to retake key terrain in northern and eastern Syria. On the other hand, Russian military involvement in Syria had caught the US off guard. In this regard, Angela Stent, a Georgetown professor and foreign policy expert, argues, "Russian unanticipated military foray into Syria has transformed the civil war there into a proxy U.S.-Russian conflict and has raised the stakes in the ongoing standoff between Moscow and Washington... Russia is now a player in the Syrian crisis, and the United States will have to find a way to deal with it."<sup>31</sup> While Russia justifies its intervention in Syria as part of countering terrorism, such a position has given Russia a key part if not the most important function in the conflict. It has also paved the way for Russia to intervene in other Middle East regional issues.

The heavy Russian involvement in the Syrian conflict forced the US to deal with this de facto situation. The US not only found itself forced to coordinate with the Russians on de-confliction between the two forces, but it found itself more open to the Russian-led peace track. As former US Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford notes, "Russia has sought to capitalize on its intervention to secure a favorable settlement that would halt the fighting and leave Syria under the control of the existing government. After the fall of Aleppo, Moscow brought delegations from the Syrian government and several opposition groups together in Astana, Kazakhstan, along with

officials from Iran and Turkey in the hope that each country would compel its Syrian allies to end hostilities on the ground.”<sup>32</sup> While the Russian intervention in Syria favored the regime and changed the anti-regime calculus including the US, it has secured an indispensable role for Russia in any counter terrorism efforts or in all suggested peaceful settlement of the conflict.

At the humanitarian level, the US played a leading role to alleviate human suffering resulting from this bloody conflict. For this reason, the US continues to assume its moral obligations and responsibilities in this ongoing struggle. According to US State Department documents, the US has provided nearly 3.3 billion US dollars as a humanitarian assistance to the Syrian people inside Syria and to the Syrian refugees in neighboring countries.<sup>33</sup> This humanitarian assistance includes providing shelter, clean water, medical care, and emergency food assistance and protection. The US is closely working with other international donors and international relief agencies to support the Syrian people in its current plight.

The main features of the US policy in Syria has been oriented towards many objectives. First, defeating VEOs in Syria through operation Inherent Resolve by supporting Kurdish and other moderate opposition groups to fight these factions. Second, supporting UN-led peace talks in Geneva that would lead to ending hostilities and transition of power in Syria to an inclusive government structure, preferably without any role of President Assad. Third, controlling Syrian WMD, which was achieved in 2013, when the Syrian regime surrender its chemical arsenal after several uses against its population. Fourth, balancing the de facto strong Russian strong role in Syria.

As seen above, President Obama’s policies were not a full departure from previous administrations, where he continued to use realistic policy choices; however, less assertive. His realistic approach is clearly manifested in the following aspects. First, he threatened Assad regime to use power in case he uses WMD against his people. Such threats led Assad to surrender his

chemical arsenal, despite the fact that Obama did not resort to direct military intervention against Assad regime even after Assad crossed Obama's red lines a couple of times. As the resident senior fellow with the Atlantic Council Faysal Itani puts it, "the president continues to show total confidence in his choice, describing it as his proudest foreign policy moment."<sup>34</sup> Such pride was reached through brokering a deal with Russia to get rid of the Syrian chemical arsenal.

Second, President Obama provided military assistance and sent US military advisors to assist the Kurds in northern Syria and several vetted armed opposition groups in their fight against VEOs. This policy was clearly based on realistic approaches but such choices did not mount to heavily armed involvement for the US military in this regard similar to previous US administrations. That said, we may argue that president Obama used hybrid strategies in Syria, where he did not fully neglect previous realistic policies in Syria, nor did he follow isolationist policies. In fact, the Obama Administration carefully calculated the risks of open military intervention similar to Iraq and Afghanistan. As David Lesch clearly puts it, "Obama does not want the United States to get whipped up into a frenzy of outrage over Syria in a way that might lead to precipitous military intervention more convulsive than well-considered."<sup>35</sup> But as US President Barack Obama stated on March 7, 2012, "For us to take military action unilaterally as some have suggested, or to think that somehow there is some simple solution, I think is a mistake."<sup>36</sup> Therefore, Obama followed a hybrid pattern of realistic but strictly calculated risks in his policy choices in Syria, because the US was dictated by several variables or determinants that heavily influenced not only US policies but all stakeholders in the conflict.

#### **4. The Main Determinants That Influenced US Policies in Syria**

The US adopted a less assertive foreign policy in Syria; nevertheless, its foreign policy remained similar to previous US administration in terms of its offensive approach. Such policies

have been dictated by the complex circumstances of the Syrian conflict. There are a number of key factors that limited the US options in Syria.

#### **4.1 Complex Geopolitics**

The Middle East region has been an area of complexities due to its geography, location, human-terrain aspects, religion, and its natural resources. Therefore, such characteristics have greatly influenced its geopolitical importance. As part of this region, Syria inherited such complexities. Syria occupies a unique location in the heart of the Middle East. Its eastern neighbor, Iraq, has been in a conflict since 1991 and the 2003 war has great ramifications on the country. To the north, Turkey is a NATO member country with big ambitions in their southern neighbors and searching for new roles in shaping the Middle East region. Israel is in the south western corner and also has antagonistic stances towards the Syrian regime. Both countries are still in a state of disengagement since 1974.<sup>37</sup> Other neighboring countries like Jordan and Lebanon had tense relations over the past decades; however, they have shouldered the biggest humanitarian burden as Syrian refugees fled to these neighboring countries.

Historically speaking, since the Ba'ath party reached power in Syria in the mid-1960s, the country aligned itself with the Soviet Union and later with Russia and has maintained a strategic alliance with Iran after 1979. The Syrian regime has maintained strong political and economic alliance with both Russia and Iran. Such anti-west policy options to the Syrian regime placed the country at odds with the US and its regional allies. When the conflict erupted in Syria in 2011, most western countries and pro-US regional powers aligned against the regime, while Russia and Iran, and Lebanese Hezbollah strongly supported the regime. As the conflict prolonged, the war turned into a proxy war between Assad regime, Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah on one side, and pro-US axis on the other side. In this regard, Turkey played a more complicated role. While Turkey's

stances are anti-Assad regime, it politically maneuvered towards accommodating the de facto Russian influence as the conflict prolonged.<sup>38</sup>

The Syrian demography is another factor of such complexities. The social fabric of the Syrian people is quite diverse. The Sunni majority population is ruled by a minority Alawites\*. Besides its Arab citizens, the country has other ethnicities, such as Kurds, Turkmens, Assyrians, and Druze (see Figure 1). The Christian communities that once constituted about 30 percent of the Syrian population have shrunk to nearly ten percent of the population due to the current security situation.<sup>39</sup> Such diverse demographic mosaic impacted the conflict and further complicates the whole situation because not only each sect or religious group has certain positions towards conflict, but also there are diverse stances within certain sects or religious groups. For instances, while the large portions of the Syrian opposition are Sunni, large portions of this community did not revolt against the regime and preferred the Assad regime rather than political vacuum or ambiguous future. As Tareq Hawari puts it, "the Syrian conflict shifted toward ethno-sectarian lines and witnessed a massive turn and resort to sectarian identities and sub-national ties."<sup>40</sup> The conflict in Syria strongly polarized these ethnicities and minorities not only in Syria, but in the whole region. As cited by Thomas Pierret "the Syrian conflict's internal dynamics have reshuffled regional alignments alongside unprecedentedly clear-cut sectarian dividing lines."<sup>41</sup> Such diverse stances have transferred the conflict into a sectarian and religious battleground.

Unlike the case of Libya, the complex geopolitics of the Syrian conflict impacted military options towards addressing the situation, and limited the anti-Assad axis from any sort of direct military intervention against Assad regime. It also may have turned the conflict into a proxy war between great powers, namely the US and Russia, and even regional powers, mainly between Iran

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\* Alawites: A syncretic sect of the Twelver branch of Shia Islam, primarily centered in Syria. The eponymously named Alawites revere Ali, considered the first Imam of the Twelver school.

and its regional allies on the one side, and the Sunni countries on the other. Such complex dynamics have hindered any settlement of the conflict.

#### **4.2 The Absence of International Consensus**

Since day one of the conflict in Syria, there was no agreement or common grounds among regional or international actors as the events unfolded. As David Lesch puts it in his book, *“Syria, The Fall of The House of Assad,”* published in 2012, “The initial reaction from practically every international actor who had a dog in this fight, so to speak, was guarded and muted. It was almost as if everyone hoped the burgeoning crisis in Syria would fizzle out and go away, so that there would be no need to make any difficult decisions regarding the proper response.”<sup>42</sup>

In the first few months of the conflict most players adopted a ‘wait and see’ policy before taking any formal stances. It was not until the end of summer 2011, especially after the increasing bloodshed in the country, the international community started to demand to take actions to stop such atrocities. As events evolved, there were two main alignments at the regional level. The first group led by Turkey and Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries who sought to support the newly established Syrian opposition. While the second group that supported the Assad regime to stay in power, which virtually was led by Iran, Lebanese Hezbollah, and large factions of Shia’ groups from Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere. Such polarization appeared at the international level as well. The Syrian conflict gradually became a Cold War type conflict between the US and its European and regional allies on the one side, and on the other side Russia, and its regional allies. As Lesch continues to describe it, “The crisis in Syria also saw the rebirth of what appeared to be a new Middle Eastern Cold War front at the international level, between a US-led bloc and a Russian-led bloc.”<sup>43</sup>

In the case of Libya, the US and key European actors managed to get a UN authorization to ‘take all necessary actions’ to protect the Libyan civilians.<sup>44</sup> In the Libyan case, Russia could

not stand out alone to support the dictatorship of Qaddafi. Therefore, there was a kind of international consensus on how to deal with the Libyan case.

The case for Syria is far more complicated. Even after the chemical attacks that were allegedly carried out by the Syrian regime against his own people in the suburbs of Damascus back in August 2013, President Barack Obama could not militarily intervene to protect the civilians similar to the Libyan case. There were mounting restraints on the US to use its military power in response to these chemical attacks. One of these restraints was the lack of international consensus similar to the Libyan case. A second factor that crippled the US administration to act was the fear of a security vacuum and possible spillover of the conflict into neighboring countries. As Missy Ryan and Gillain Brockell argue, “it has also shielded the president’s legacy from the toxic fallout of another Middle Eastern intervention like that in Libya, where strife and lawlessness have plagued its post-revolution era.”<sup>45</sup> Such military involvement would provoke unknown consequences that would draw the US into war, which was against President’s Obama core priorities.

For other countries, they have abstained from taking sides in the Syrian issue. Many regional and other international actors have not taken any firm stance due to internal issues. Despite receiving large portions of Syrian refugees, Lebanon for example followed a policy of non-interference in the ongoing conflict of Syria because its fragile political balance and any alignments would jeopardize such fragile stability.<sup>46</sup> Another regional example is Iraq. Despite the fact that many Iraqi Shia groups have joined pro-Assad militias, Iraq has avoided any firm position on the Syrian arena due to its fragile political structure and perhaps due to US influence on the Iraqi government.

As noted above, there is no international consensus on how to interfere in the Syrian conflict similar to other regional cases, despite the horrific humanitarian crisis that emerged out of the

conflict and the unprecedented levels of violence, deaths and human suffering. As a representative of the international community, the UN has and still continues to search for a peaceful settlement to this thorny conflict; nevertheless, the diverse regional and international stances have crippled the UN from authorizing UN-backed resolution to aggressively address the deteriorating situation in Syria. Accordingly, it is also worth mentioning that Russia and China have vetoed seven times all UN Security Council resolutions on Syria that seek actions against Assad regime according to Asia News Monitor.<sup>47</sup> It is clearly noticed that such widely diverse stances on Syria are due to different and probably conflicting interests among the two main blocs. As noted in a 2013 RAND publication, "There is an asymmetry of interests among external actors: Those supporting the Assad regime see the conflict's stakes in starker terms than do supporters of the opposition."<sup>48</sup> Unlike pro-regime countries that their main effort is to keep Assad in power, there are different and even conflicting agendas for those countries that support the opposition. Such stances have ultimately served Assad and weakened his opposition.

The lack of international consensus and the complexities of the geopolitics of the conflict were not the only factors to influence the US policies towards Syria. The rise and spread of VEOs that exploited the security vacuum and the availability of ungoverned space whether in Iraq or Syria further complicated the already complex situation in Syria.

### **4.3 The Rise of VEOs**

The rise of several VEOs in Syria especially after 2013 greatly contributed to the complexity of the conflict. Incidentally, it has forced key players to rearrange their priorities and options regarding the Syrian conflict. The US in particular shifted its political agenda from regime change in Syria to focusing on fighting VEOs, especially ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Despite the facts that the Obama administration insisted on the removal of Assad, it was no more than political rhetoric, facts on the ground reflected that the US has a top priority, which is to fight terrorism

because it was perceived as an immediate threat to the region, Europe and the US national interests. For example, in 2014 President Obama authorized US airstrikes on ISIS. As the *New York Times* columnist Patricia Smith argues, “Rapid territorial gains by ISIS and the group’s recent beheadings of two American journalist convinced Obama that avoiding military action in Syria was no longer an option.”<sup>49</sup>

The US approach since 2014 onward has focused on limited approaches, which is countering terrorism. In October 2014, the US established a coalition of regional and other key partners to conduct airstrikes against ISIS in Syria and Iraq. The objective of this coalition was to defeat and degrade ISIS capabilities and infrastructure. Since that time, the coalition operations have resulted in remarkable loss of territorial control and capabilities for ISIS, especially after the fall of Mosul and Raqqa city. In addition, the US maintained a military presence of 1000-2000 US soldiers in northern and eastern Syria to assist the Kurdish and other Arab factions in fighting VEOs according to former US Ambassador to Syria Mr. Robert Ford.<sup>50</sup>

The US military efforts against ISIS paved the way to militarily degrading the organization’s capabilities and capacities. However, this does not mean that it is already defeated. Fighting terrorism requires a broader approach that addresses the root causes of this phenomenon. Such approach requires more robust and closely coordinated efforts from all stakeholders, especially the US and Russia. It also demands that those two powers should find more common ground between them in regard to this conflict. Key regional countries like, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey should put their rivalries a side through US diplomatic pressure, so they stop their proxy wars in Syria,<sup>51</sup> which fuel the rise and empowerment of VEOs. Such endeavor will assist in fighting the phenomenon of terrorism in the region and beyond.

#### 4.4 Weak Syrian Opposition

One of the main factors that influenced the current US policy in Syria was the lack of genuine unified political and military Syrian opposition. One of the reasons behind such weakness came as a result of the authoritarian nature of the Assad regime, where it did not allow any kind of institutional opposition or parties to its decades-long rule. As James Denselow argues, “The regime pursued a policy of repression that would force many political actors out of the country.”<sup>52</sup> This is one reason. There are a few factors that weakened the Syrian opposition.

Over the course of the conflict, the Syrian opposition remained fractured and uncoordinated, despite the establishment of relatively inclusive representational bodies, like the Syrian National Council (SNC). However, the Syrian opposition still suffers from genuine lack of coherence, because its loyalty to foreign actors who support these groups. It is also worth mentioning that these Syrian opposition groups were manipulated to achieve their patron interests, which in many cases directly collided with other opposition patrons. Therefore Denselow continues to argue, “A lack of coherence made it hard to present an alternative vision for the country”<sup>53</sup>

In the same vein, Syrian opposition from decades of suppression by the Assad regime, lacked the required political and administrative experience to handle any possible transitional period. The Syrian journalist Iso Mihyedin notes in one of his articles that was published in London in 2012 that, “the Opposition will require time to become capable of gaining the political experience to lead the next stage of establishing a Syrian state for all Syrians”<sup>54</sup>

Another element that raised an alarm for the international community and mainly to the US and other key European players was the ambiguous links between some ideologically-oriented armed opposition groups and VEOs.<sup>55</sup> Many opposition fighters have abandoned their groups and pledged allegiances to terrorist groups in Syria. Furthermore, large portions of the weapons and ammunition that were offered to the opposition ended up in the wrong hands and reached terrorist

organizations. For instance, hundreds of armed opposition fighters in southern Syria moved to groups and joined Al-Nusra Front,<sup>56</sup> which designated by the US as a terrorist group. The increasing relations between some factions of the Syrian opposition and the increasing levels of corruption have enormously discredited the whole opposition and pushed many opposition supporters to reconsider their policies. Put succinctly, the contradicting positions for Syrian opposition groups that are related to their different patrons, ideologies, loyalties, and agendas make it difficult to the Syrian opposition to present itself as a viable replacement even within any possible negotiated settlement or political transition.

## **5. Policy Recommendations**

The situation in Syria is very complicated and it is very difficult to take a stance given the complex and rapidly-changing security environment. The US, during Obama administration, maintained realistic policies towards the Syrian issue; however, there were several factors that influenced such policies and pushed for less assertive policies. A wide spectrum of US politicians and scholars share skeptical views when it comes to Syria. As Robert Ford, the former US ambassador to Syria, claims "the United States has no good options in Syria, but some are worse than others."<sup>57</sup> The US policy towards Syria has not witnessed real change with President Donald Trump. So far, the US policy in Syria has followed similar path to Obama's policy. This validates that the same complicated realities on the ground are still influencing the US policy in Syria at least at the short and medium terms.

There are some policy recommendations that may assist the US in handling the Syrian conflict in a manner that will circumvent humanitarian suffering and violence. At the same, these recommendation, if followed, may pave the way for a negotiated settlement that takes into

consideration the new realities and developments on the ground, and ultimately will enable the US to regain its leading role, credibility not only in the Middle East but elsewhere.

First, the US should work closely with regional partners and key international stakeholders in order to continue its campaign against ISIS and other terrorist groups in Syria. The liberation of Raqqa and Mosul have offered the US-led coalition great credibility among the populations of the region. Therefore, while it is necessary for the US to continue in this endeavor, it should apply a more holistic approach to fight terrorism and seriously engage addressing other drivers of instability in the Middle East region, such as the stalemated Middle East Peace Process, which still represents a central issue in the region.

Second, while it is inevitable for the US to acknowledge the de facto realities on the ground, represented on the current Russian and Iranian influence. It is very important for the US to re-seize the initiative through applying political pressures on all involved parties, including Russia to revive the stalemated political settlement according to previous UN resolutions and agreements, taking into consideration the current reality on the ground. Such leading role will disrupt Russian hegemonic agenda and impose huge pressure on the Syrian parties to seriously engage in negotiated settlement. The US should place emphasis on the UN-led peace-talks track at Geneva instead of the Russian sponsored tracks at Astana and recently in Sochi, Russia. By the same token, the US should have a clear position on the future of Assad in any future stage for the country. The US should considering to offer more incentives to Russia in order to compel Russia to cooperate. Such incentives may be through signaling that the US might work with the Assad regime in countering VEOs for example, or any other possible venues. The US can use its leverage to convince Russia to pressure Assad to accede to a negotiated agreement that will lead to a transitional period through the establishment of inclusive government.

Third, the US should lead international efforts to address the humanitarian suffering of the Syrian people and create a mechanism by which it ensures the flow of humanitarian assistance to those who are in urgent need. The US can launch an information operations campaign to win the minds and hearts of the Syrian people that would assist the US and its partners in this regard. Such initiatives have to address the presence of millions of Syrian refugees in neighboring countries and it should assist those countries in alleviating the heavy burden on those countries' economies due to the presence of these refugee camps. The US should lead such international efforts, where other rich regional countries can also assist in alleviating the human suffering of the Syrians and the countries that harbor Syrian refugees.

Fourth, The US should take into consideration the security concerns of regional countries. Many countries are quite aggravated by the increasing military presence of Iranian and armed Shia militias in Syria, since these groups will not hesitate to destabilize neighboring countries whenever they have the opportunity. At the same time the Turkish concerns of the US empowerment of the Kurdish communities in northern Syria, should be addressed with Turkey in order to bring all key partners on board with these efforts.

Fifth, the US and the international community should play an important role in rebuilding Syria. The country's infrastructure has been severely damaged throughout this thorny conflict. This expected long period of reconstruction demands a collective effort from the international community and donors countries. The US should take the lead in this issue in order to restore its regional position and assist in fulfilling the aspirations of the Syrian people after the war has torn the country apart.

## 6. Conclusion

While the US has adopted more assertive policies in several regional conflicts like Iraq and Libya, it adopted less assertive foreign policy in Syria, especially during the Obama administration. In fact, its foreign policy remained similar to previous US administrations' foreign policy in terms of its realistic approach. However, Obama's policy choices were different in terms of adopting very carefully risk-calculated policies, in order to avoid any negative consequences. Therefore, Obama followed a hybrid pattern of realistic but carefully calculated choices in Syria, because the US was predisposed by several variables or determinants that heavily influenced not only US policies but all stakeholders in the conflict. There are a number of key factors that limited the US options in Syria and forced the US to follow certain policies. Firstly, the complexities of any direct military intervention. Second, the absence of international consensus on Syria. Third, the rise of VOs in the country. And finally, the absence of genuine replacement to the Assad regime.

There are no full departure from previous administration policies, but the realities on the ground have played major role in crafting the US policies in the Syrian scene since the eruption of the conflict until the end of President Obama's administration period.

Appendix A: Figures

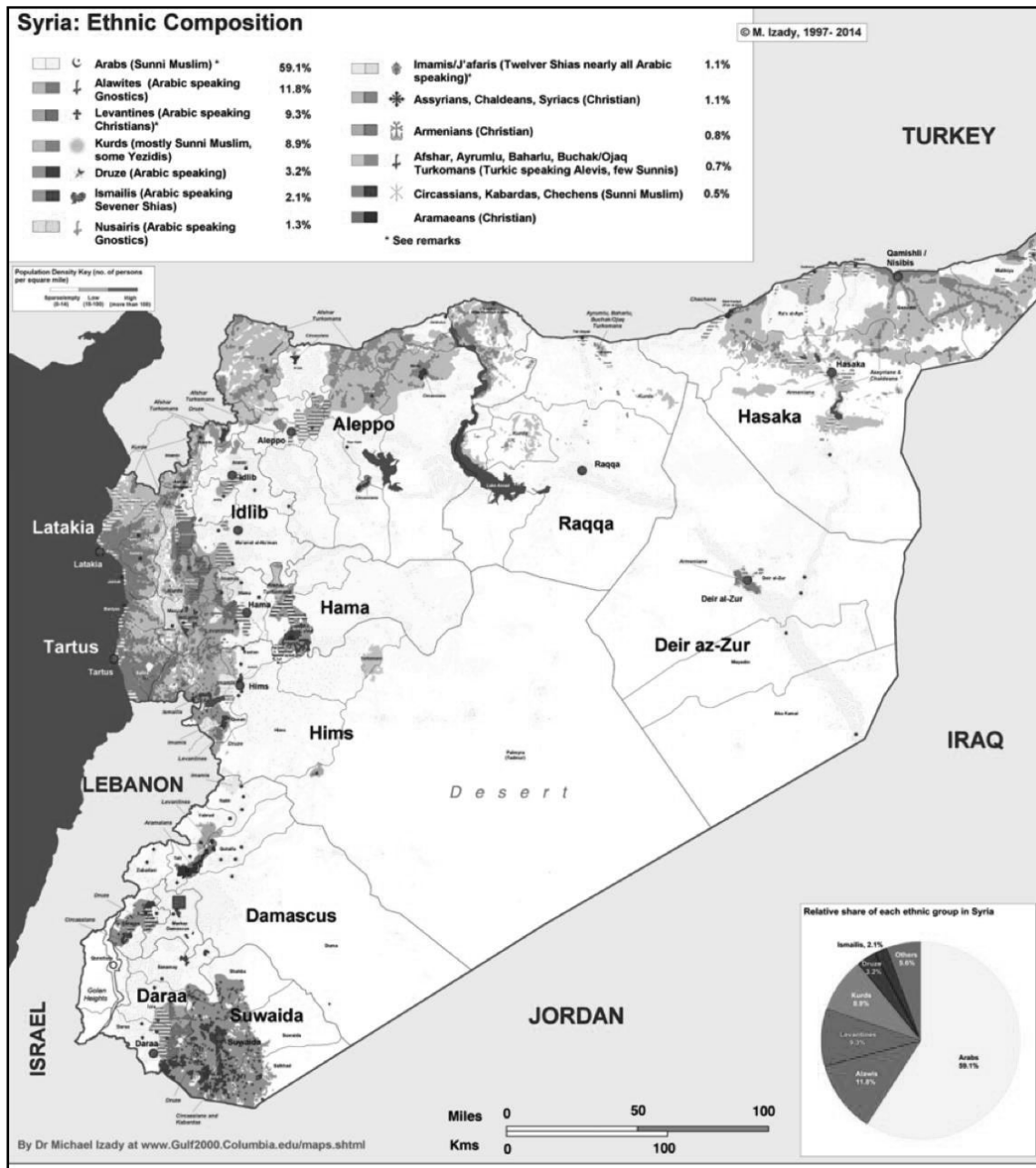


Figure 1: The map shows Syrian population ethnic and religious composition, 2014  
(By Michael Izady)

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