
A Survey of Expert Judgments on the Effects of Counterfactual US Actions on Civilian Fatalities in Syria, 2011 - 2016

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Summary

The survey focused on four “minimal rewrite” counterfactuals: (a) President Obama’s not calling publicly for Syrian president Bashar al-Assad to “step aside” in 2011, (b) the vetting and arming of moderate rebels in 2012, (c) the use of airstrikes to enforce the “red line” against chemical weapons use in 2013, and (d) the choice of an “Assad first” strategy instead of an “ISIS first” strategy in 2014.¹ Respondents were asked to make probabilistic assessments on whether the counterfactual actions would have resulted in fewer civilian fatalities over the subsequent 12 months. They were also asked to cite the most important factors that led to their assessments and to identify other US government actions that would have been more effective in reducing civilian fatalities at the time.

The clearest findings are (a) on average, respondents did not rate any of the four main counterfactuals very highly: neither the median nor the mean response on any of the four key counterfactual estimates was as high as 50 percent; and (b) very little consensus existed among respondents about the effect of the counterfactual actions on civilian fatalities over the subsequent year. The data reveal greater consensus on what the “most important factors” were, yet some striking disagreement on key analytical points. Finally, the most frequently cited ideas of other actions that would have helped reduce civilian fatalities were various types of (direct or indirect) military actions.

Goals

1. **Collect data on experts’ assessments of prominent counterfactuals.** The public debate about US Syria policy has been quite polarized, with the loudest views tending toward the extremes. Yet it is unclear whether the opinions of experts writ large reflect the same pattern. Thus, the first goal of this survey was to collect structured data to be able to describe experts’ judgments with greater precision and to identify the most important factors underlying their judgments.
2. **Contribute to assessment of counterfactuals arguments.** In light of its utility for forecasting applications, there is reason to believe that aggregated individual assessments can contribute to a multifaceted assessment of counterfactual outcomes. The ability to quantify probabilistic judgments has potential to complement other research methods that are necessarily less precise.
3. **Identify other potential US government actions that might have helped prevent or mitigate atrocities.** At each of the four critical junctures, the survey asks respondents to identify other actions that they believe would have been more effective at the time.

¹ I thank Daniel Solomon for his research assistance and Caitlin Drummond, Baruch Fischhoff, Chad Hazlett, Drazen Prelec, and Philip Tetlock for their expert advice on survey design and analysis for counterfactual assessment.

Methodology

The author drafted the survey instrument based largely on the four main policy choices and the alternative options described in Mona Yacoubian's research on critical junctures in US Syria policy.² We pretested the survey with several Simon-Skjodt Center staff and revised it on the basis of their feedback.

Center staff developed a list of 341 potential respondents in three categories of expertise: (a) experts on the conflict in Syria that began in 2011, (b) experts on US government strategies and tools to prevent or respond to mass atrocities, and (c) people with firsthand knowledge of US government policy debates regarding Syria in this period.

The author e-mailed invitations to the list of potential respondents. The e-mail included a link to the survey on the Qualtrics online survey platform. The survey was open from May 9 – 22, 2017. All responses were anonymous.

Results

1. Who responded to the survey?

Fifty-six people (about 16 percent of the total sample) completed the survey. Responses to questions about respondents' relevant knowledge or expertise, cognitive style, and beliefs about effective atrocity prevention strategies indicate that they are a fairly diverse group. For example, 19 people reported having firsthand knowledge of the US government policy debates regarding Syria for some part of the period from 2011 to the date of the survey; 26 reported having expert knowledge about US government strategies and tools to prevent mass atrocities; and 21 reported having expert knowledge about the conflict in Syria during that period. Thirty-three identified themselves as being "foxes" and 20 as being "hedgehogs," using Isaiah Berlin's archetypes of cognitive style. On what the US government should focus its atrocity prevention efforts in general, 24 said to emphasize facilitating resolution of the underlying conflict, whereas 17 said to emphasize imposing costs on perpetrators; 10 said the United States should do both with equal emphasis.

2. How did experts assess the likelihood that the counterfactual actions would have resulted in fewer civilian fatalities? To what extent did experts agree on the effect of the key counterfactual options?

Perhaps the most notable finding concerning experts' probability assessments is that neither the median nor the mean response on any of the four key counterfactual estimates was as high as 50 percent. (See table 1 for descriptive statistics.³) The counterfactual that experts rated highest was

² Mona Yacoubian, "Critical Junctures in United States Policy toward Syria: An Assessment of the Counterfactuals," Series of Occasional Papers, no. 3, Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide, Washington, DC, August 2017.

³ This paper is limited to descriptive statistics; a subsequent version will pursue statistical inference.

the use of airstrikes to enforce the chemical weapons “red line.” Yet fully half of respondents thought it was less likely than not that those strikes would have resulted in fewer civilian fatalities. The lowest rated counterfactual was not making the “step aside” statement, with the median response being 15 percent and 17 of 56 (30 percent) assigning zero chance of fewer civilian fatalities.

Table 1: Probability Estimates: Effects of Counterfactual Actions on Civilian Fatalities over Subsequent 12 Months

	Had Obama Not Called on Assad to “Step Aside” (2011)	Had Clinton- Petraeus Plan Been Adopted (2012)	Had “Red Line” Been Enforced with Airstrikes (2013)	Had Obama Chosen “Assad First” Strategy (2014)
Median	15.0	30.0	47.5	25.0
Mean	23.9	31.2	44.3	30.5
Standard deviation	26.3	26.3	32.2	26.8

A second prominent finding from these data is the lack of consensus among experts about the effect of the counterfactual actions on civilian fatalities over the subsequent year; put another way, these data are extremely “noisy.” Table 1 shows that the standard deviation was greater than 26 for all four questions. The wide variability across respondents on these questions is easily visualized in figures 1–4.

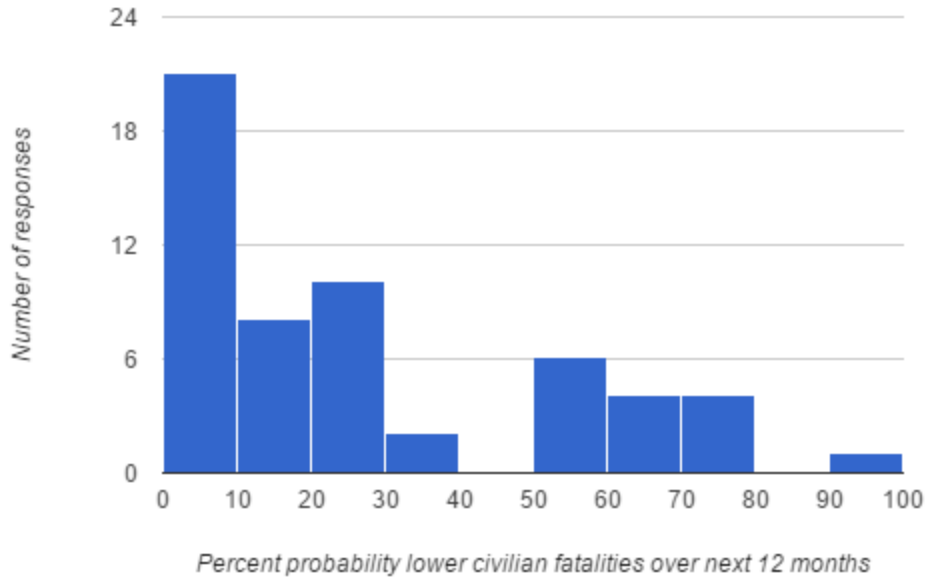


Figure 1: Q1.1. Had Obama not called on Assad to “step aside”; percentage probability of fewer civilian fatalities over next 12 months.

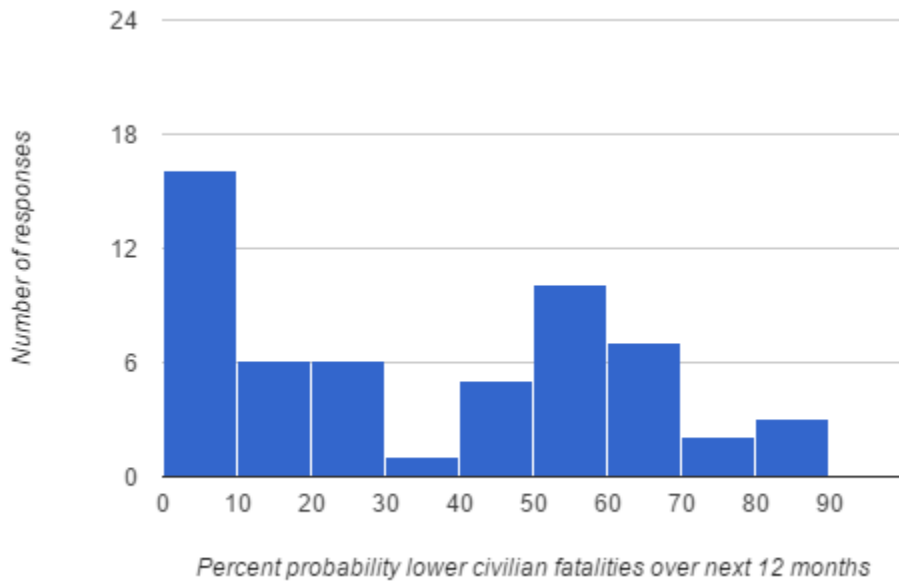


Figure 2: Q2.1. Had Clinton-Petraeus plan been adopted; percentage probability of fewer civilian fatalities over next 12 months.

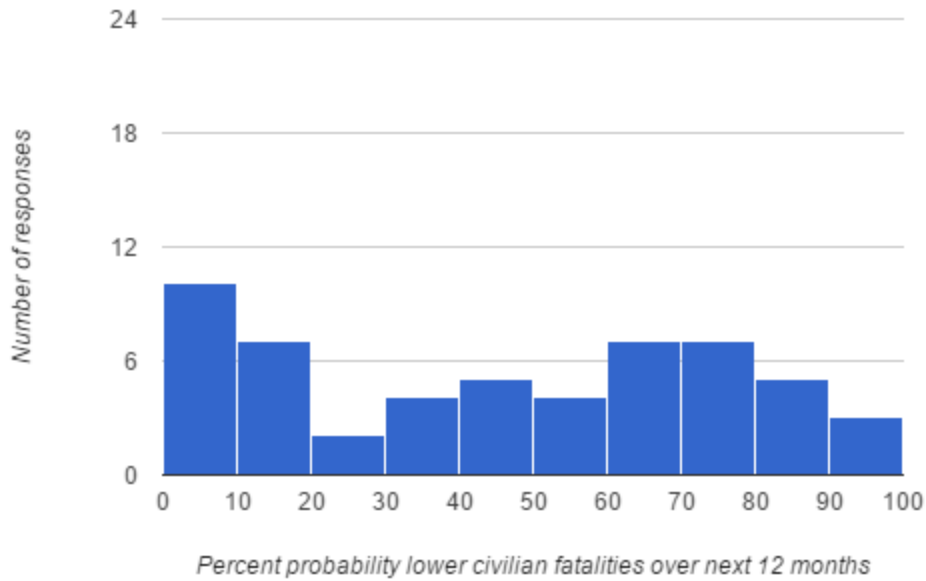


Figure 3: Q3.1. Had “red line” been enforced with airstrikes; percentage probability of fewer civilian fatalities over next 12 months.

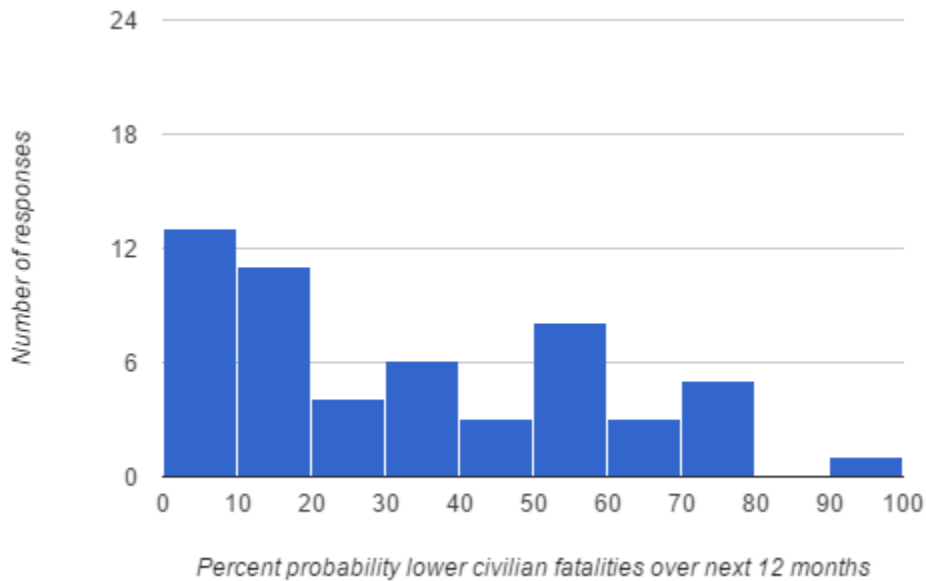


Figure 4: Q4.1. Had United States chosen “Assad first” strategy; percentage probability of fewer civilian fatalities over next 12 months.

3. *What were the most important factors that led experts to their assessments?*

Figures 5–8 show the number of respondents who cited various factors as having been “most important” in shaping their probabilistic assessments.

Analysis of the open-ended responses suggests that more agreement existed on the important factors than on the (probabilistic) effect of the counterfactual actions. In assessing the impact had airstrikes been used to enforce the “red line” in 2013, 33 of 53 respondents (62 percent) said that airstrikes would have deterred Assad, signaled US resolve, or that the lack of airstrikes signaled that Assad had a free hand. This is the only case in which a majority of respondents agreed on a most important factor.

The “most important factors” cited also highlight respondents’ sensitivity to unintended negative consequences. In the Clinton-Petraeus and the “Assad first” assessments, substantial numbers of respondents—25 and 16, respectively—cited the likelihood that the counterfactuals would have resulted in higher numbers of civilian fatalities. This was the most commonly cited factor in both cases.

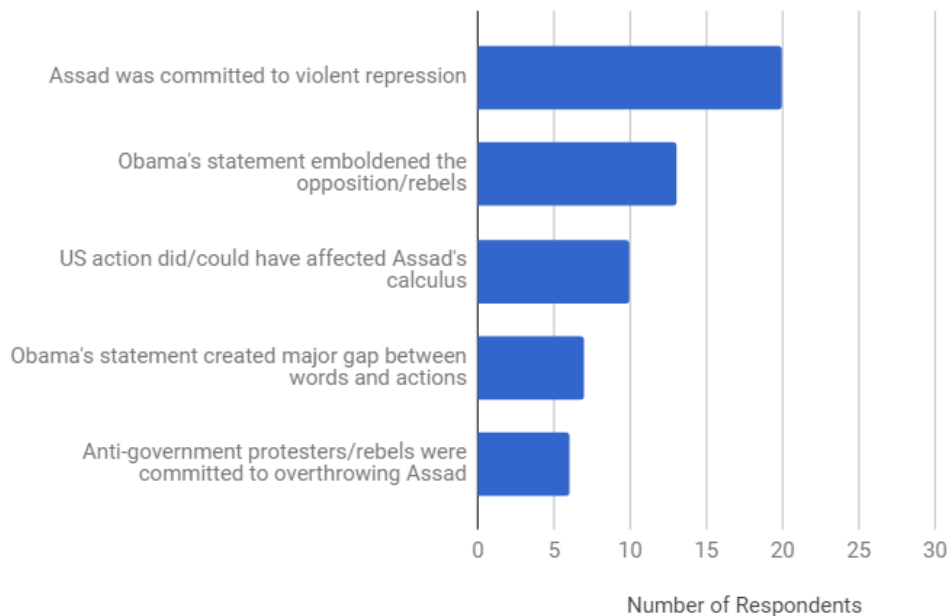


Figure 5: Had Obama not called for Assad to “step aside”; primary factors cited leading to assessment of impact.

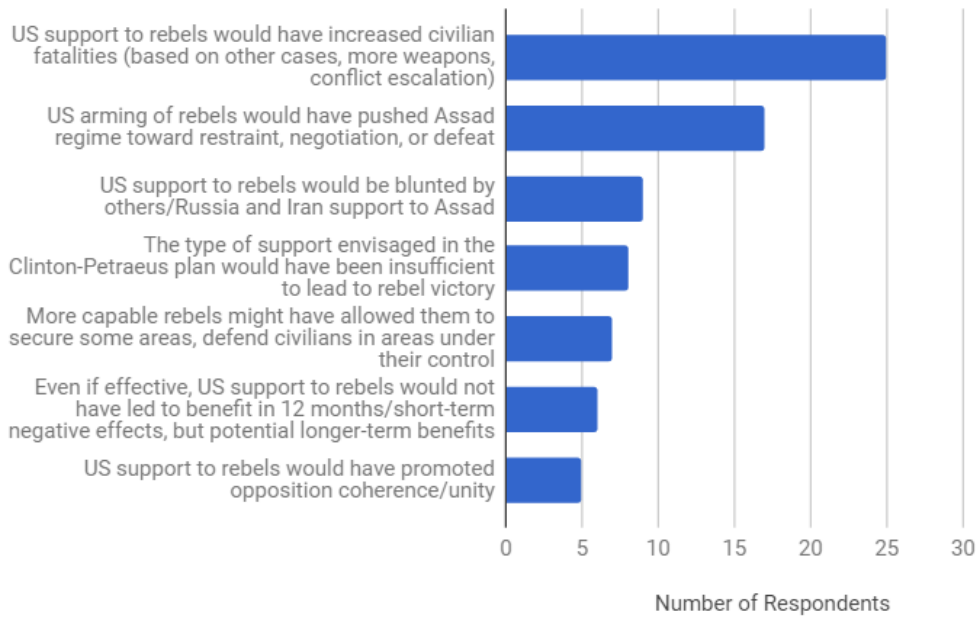


Figure 6: Had Clinton-Petraeus plan been adopted; primary factors cited leading to assessment of impact.

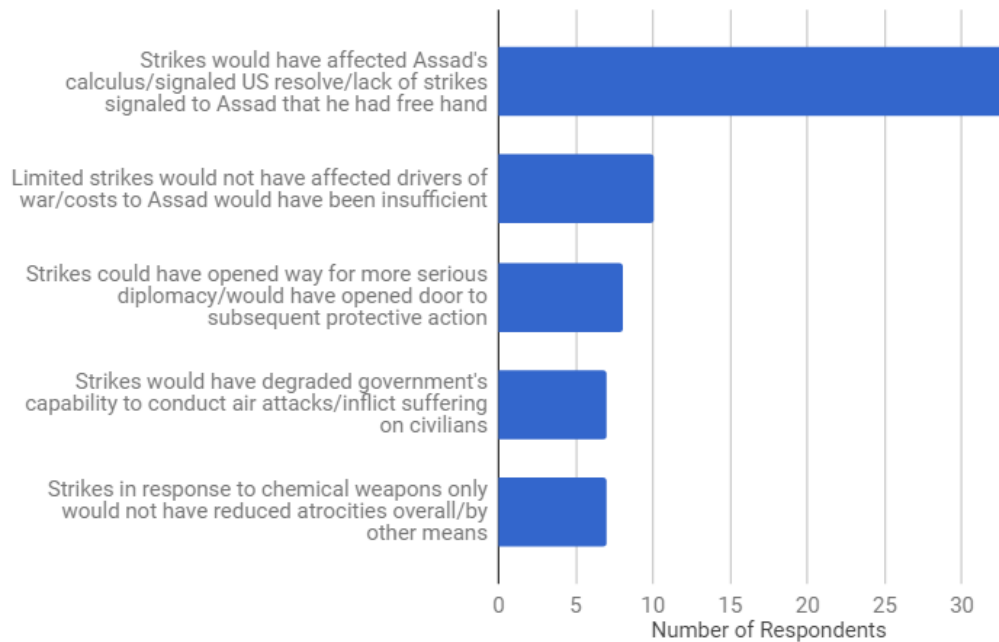


Figure 7: Had "red line" been enforced with airstrikes; primary factors cited leading to assessment of impact.

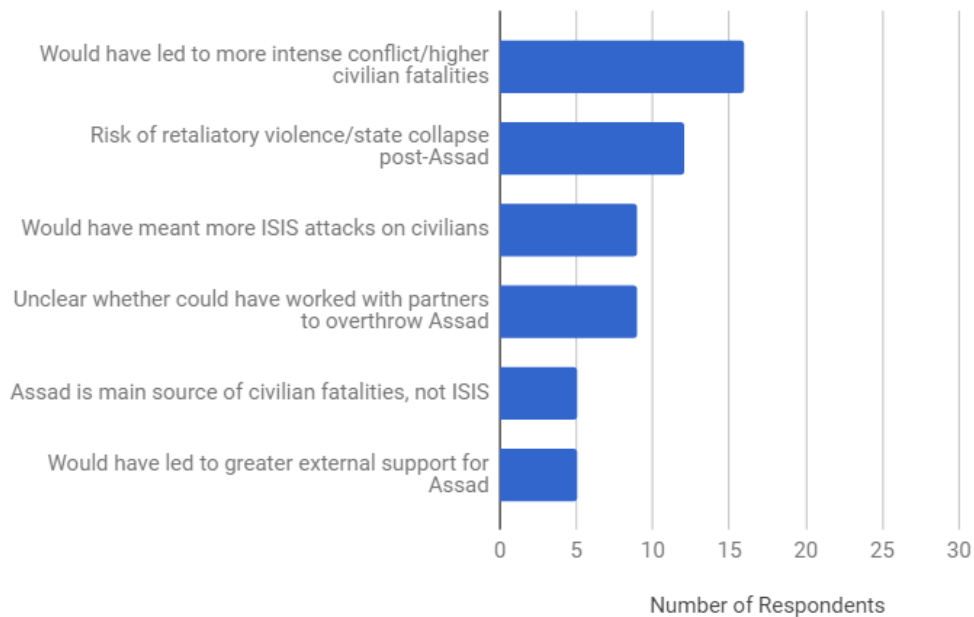


Figure 8: Had United States chosen “Assad first” strategy; primary factors cited leading to assessment of impact.

In some cases, the responses regarding the “most important factors” revealed specific points of analytic disagreement, which apparently help explain widely divergent probability estimates. This point is clearest in respondents’ assessment of the “step aside” counterfactual. Twenty respondents judged that Assad was committed to violent repression regardless of Obama’s statement, whereas ten said the statement did affect Assad’s calculus or the counterfactual could have affected it. Similarly, 13 said Obama’s statement emboldened the opposition, whereas 6 said that opposition activists were committed to Assad’s ouster regardless of Obama’s statement.

4. What other options did experts say would have been more effective in reducing civilian fatalities over the subsequent 12 months?

Table 2 summarizes the open-ended responses regarding other actions that might have been more effective at each stage.

Across the full period, respondents most often cited different kinds of (direct or indirect) military interventions. Direct US military intervention was the most commonly cited alternative action, with no-fly zones, humanitarian corridors and safe zones, and support to the armed opposition also among the top five; together, they comprise 50 percent of all alternative actions mentioned. This result does not include the threat to use force to punish atrocities, which was also cited more than a dozen times.

Table 2: Other Options That Would Have Been More Effective In Reducing Civilian Fatalities over the Subsequent Year

	2011	2012	2013	2014	Total
Direct military intervention	17	8	9	4	38
Diplomacy (different strategy, more vigorous)	19	6	6	1	32
No-fly zone	8	8	8	2	26
Humanitarian corridors/safe zones	6	10	6	3	25
Support to armed opposition (more, better controlled/coordinated across donor states)	7	9	4	1	21
Threats to use force to punish atrocities	9	6	1	0	16
Humanitarian assistance	0	5	3	3	11
Sanctions	8	2	0	0	10
Statement that principal objective was to reduce atrocities (without respect to Assad's future)	6	2	0	0	8
Inducement of defections	5	1	1	0	7
More active monitoring, investigations/public "naming and shaming"	3	2	0	1	6

More vigorous diplomacy or the adoption of a different diplomatic strategy was the most commonly cited action in 2011 and second across the entire period. The other top nonmilitary actions were humanitarian assistance, sanctions, and a clear statement that the principal US objective was to reduce atrocities without respect to Assad's future.

A few respondents identified actions, such as inducements for Assad to desist or leave office and support to local civil society, which have been less frequently discussed in the public debate. These were the exceptions, however.

5. *Did different types of experts assess the counterfactuals differently?*

We used responses to the questions on relevant knowledge and expertise, beliefs about effective atrocity prevention strategies, and cognitive style to explore whether any consistent differences emerged in assessing the counterfactual policies based on these characteristics.

Consistent with past research, these survey data suggest that experts’ predispositions about the kinds of actions that are likely to be effective, in general—ideology, in Tetlock’s terms—strongly shape their assessments of the particular counterfactuals.⁴ Specifically, as figure 9 shows, respondents who believed that the United States should generally focus its atrocity prevention efforts on punishing perpetrators rated the “step aside” counterfactual lower and the other counterfactuals higher than respondents who believed that the United States should focus on facilitating resolution of the underlying conflict. The differences were greatest for the “red line” counterfactual, which is the clearest exemplification of a perpetrator punishment strategy.

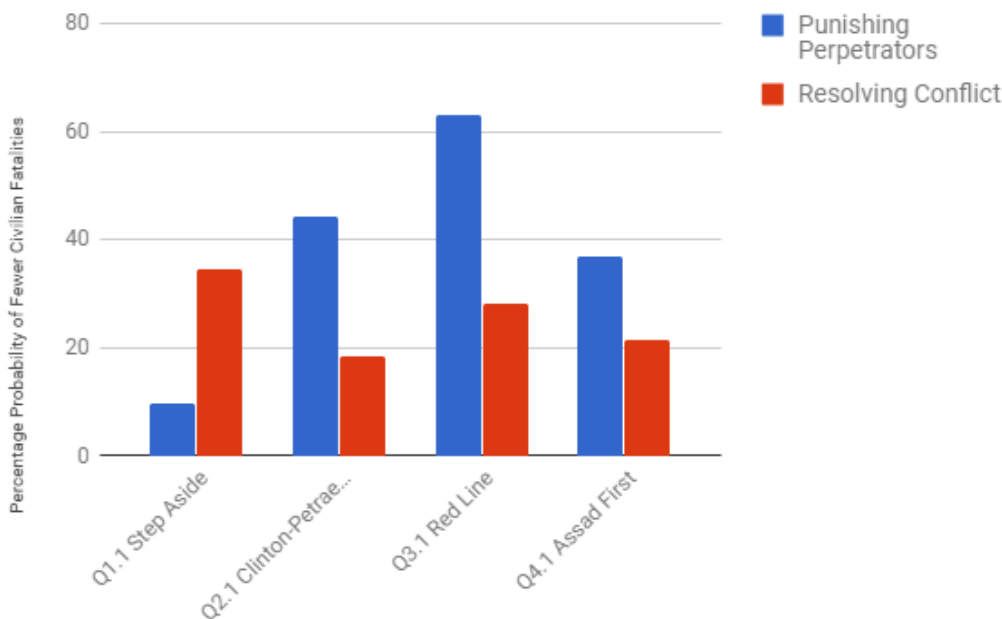


Figure 9: Counterfactual assessments by response to what the United States should focus its atrocity prevention efforts on in general.

⁴ Philip E. Tetlock, *Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It? How Can We Know?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), chap. 5.

Ideology was correlated with types of expertise, making it difficult to disentangle their independent influence. Specifically, “firsthand knowledge of the US government policy debates regarding Syria for some part of the period 2011–present” is correlated with the belief that US policy should focus on punishing perpetrators (correlation coefficient 0.36; see table 3 for cross-tabulation). In addition, from these data it is impossible to know whether people with firsthand knowledge might have changed their views about how the United States should focus its efforts in general based on their experience working the Syria case. Nevertheless, we observe that, on average, those with firsthand knowledge rated the “step aside” counterfactual lower than other respondents and rated each of the other three counterfactuals higher than others (see figure 10). The differences were greatest for the Clinton-Petraeus proposal and the airstrikes to enforce the “red line.”

Table 3: Cross-Tabulation of Firsthand Knowledge of US Syria Policy and Where United States Should Focus Its Atrocity Prevention Efforts

	Firsthand Knowledge	No Firsthand Knowledge	Total
Imposing costs on perpetrators (emphasis or entirely)	10 (18%)	7 (13%)	17 (31%)
Equal emphasis	3 (5%)	7 (13%)	10 (18%)
Facilitating resolution of underlying conflict (emphasis or entirely)	6 (11%)	22 (40%)	28 (51%)
Total	19 (35%)	36 (65%)	

Regarding cognitive style, self-reported hedgehogs and foxes were nearly identical in their assessment of the “step aside” and “red line” counterfactuals (see figure 11). Though the data are quite noisy, hedgehogs rated the Clinton-Petraeus counterfactual slightly higher (means of 39 percent and 28 percent, respectively) and the “Assad first” counterfactual much higher (means of 43 percent and 23 percent, respectively) than did foxes. One can imagine that the “one big thing” that many hedgehogs know in this context is that Assad is at the root of the atrocities against Syrian civilians; therefore, an “Assad first” strategy would hold more appeal. In light of Tetlock’s extensive research demonstrating that foxes tend to be more accurate forecasters and more open to “self-subversive” counterfactual scenarios, it is reasonable to assume that the true percentage probabilities are closer to the average fox responses than to the average hedgehog responses.

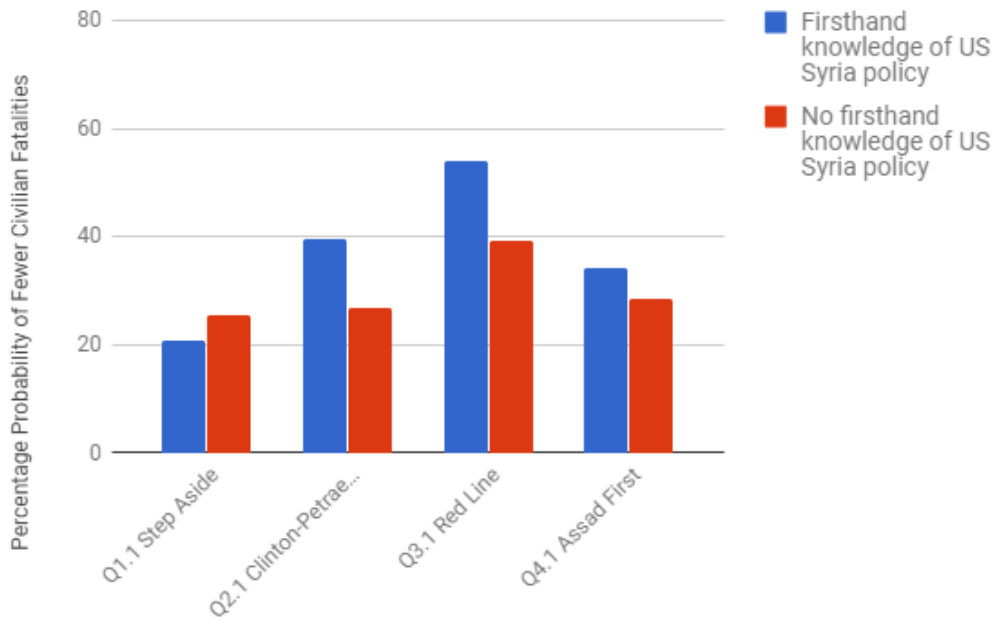


Figure 10: Counterfactual assessments by whether respondents report having firsthand knowledge of US Syria policy.

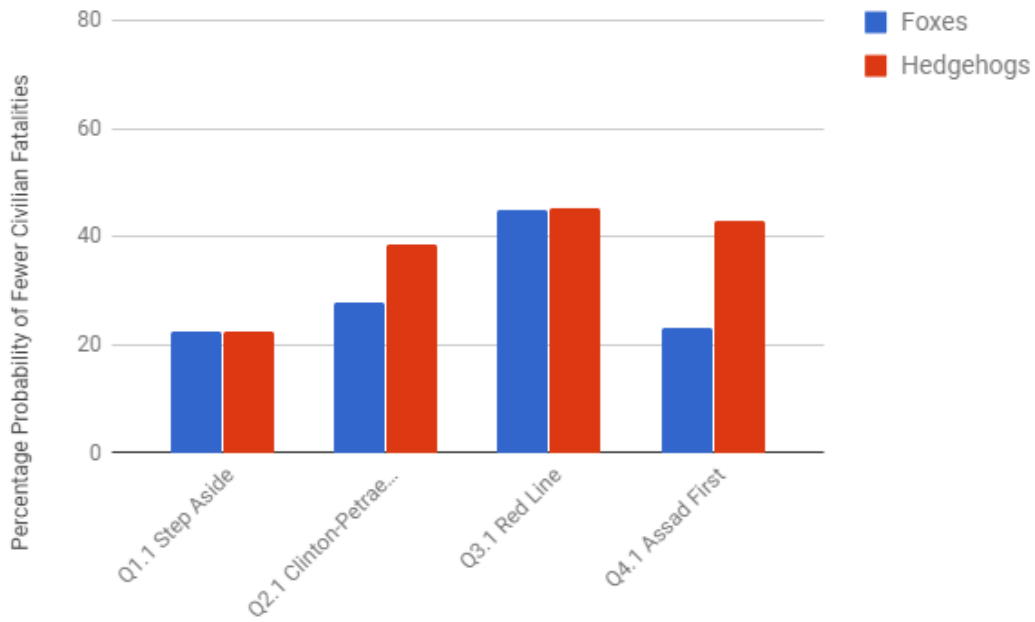


Figure 11: Counterfactual assessments by self-reported cognitive style.

Discussion

Although it makes no claims to being representative of the full universe of relevant experts, the results of this survey provide little support to the contention that any of the most plausible counterfactual US government actions would have led to fewer civilian fatalities over the subsequent year. The relatively low average probabilities together with the huge variation in judgments across the sample means that whereas some experts rated each of the counterfactuals highly, many others disagreed, some by large amounts. This outcome most likely reflects the limits of expert knowledge applied to these extremely difficult assessments. It cannot be ruled out, however, that the noisiness of these data is substantially caused by respondents' difficulty assigning probabilities for effects that are highly contingent and inherently unknowable.

The responses to the open-ended questions could be useful going forward to identify specific analytic questions that most accept are highly consequential, yet on which expert views diverge sharply. For example, did Obama's statement calling on Assad to "step aside" in 2011 embolden opposition activists to push for maximalist goals? Or were they already fully committed to these ends, regardless of the US government position? Breaking down the assessment of likely consequences into discrete contentions such as these and examining each in detail on the basis of the available evidence could help move toward consensus in the overall assessment.

The findings about how respondents' characteristics are associated with differences in assessment of counterfactuals were generally unsurprising. The apparent influence of experts' predispositions about how the US government ought to focus its atrocity prevention efforts in general strongly echoes Tetlock's findings on how ideology affects counterfactual assessments. It could be useful for future surveys concerning atrocity prevention to ask experts to assess the same counterfactual policy action in multiple country cases—real or fictitious—that vary on specific factors hypothesized to influence the effectiveness of the action. This might help clarify how much of the debates about counterfactuals in a case like Syria are just a special form of ideological debate and how much they actually depend on assessments of the particulars of a case.

Survey Instrument

Survey on US Syria Policy since 2011

Q1 Page 1/6 This survey is part of a research project by the Simon-Skjoldt Center for the Prevention of Genocide at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum about U.S. policy in relation to atrocities against civilians in Syria since 2011. The questions will ask you to assess the likely impact of several U.S. government actions that were considered, but not taken. Given the focus of this research, we ask only about impact on civilian fatalities over the subsequent 12 months, recognizing that these actions would have had other impacts as well. To keep the survey to a manageable length—it should take no more than 15 minutes to complete—we ask about just four key decision points. Your answers will be automatically saved in case you need to complete the survey in more than one session. Responses will be reported in aggregate form only. We may quote from open-ended responses, but will never link your answers with your name.

Q2 Page 2/6 Policy Choice 1: Call for Assad to “step aside”? Between March and August 2011, U.S. officials debated how to respond to the Syrian government’s violent suppression of anti-government protests. In August 2011, President Obama and leaders of the UK, France, Germany and European Union publicly called for Syrian President Assad to “step aside.” Imagine that President Obama and allied leaders had not called publicly for Assad to step aside in August 2011.

Q3 1.1. In that scenario, what is the percent probability that the number of civilian fatalities in Syria over the subsequent 12 months would have been lower than actually occurred?

_____ %

Q4 1.2. What are the most important factors that lead you to this assessment?

Q5 1.3. We’re interested in how you think other experts on Syria and on U.S. government tools to prevent mass atrocities will answer these questions. This will allow us to look at whether you would be surprised by your peers’ assessments. What do you think the average response of experts will be to Question 1.1?

_____ %

Q6 1.4. Were there other actions the U.S. government could have taken at the time that would have been more effective, in terms of reducing the number of civilian fatalities over the subsequent 12 months?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

Q7 1.4.a. Please specify.

Q8 1.5. Was there information available at the time that should have been given greater weight in the U.S. policy debate?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

Q9 1.5.a. Please specify.

Q10 Page 3/6 Policy Choice 2: Train & equip the armed opposition? In the summer of 2012, the U.S. government was overtly providing non-lethal support to Syrian political opposition groups, and according to many reports, covertly supporting armed opposition groups, though not directly supplying them with arms. Then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and then-CIA Director David Petraeus proposed providing arms and training overtly to vetted elements of the armed Syrian opposition. The proposal was not adopted. Imagine that the Clinton-Petraeus proposal for providing arms and training to vetted elements of the Syrian opposition had been adopted in the summer of 2012.

Q11 2.1. In that scenario, what is the percent probability that the number of civilian fatalities in Syria over the subsequent 12 months would have been lower than actually occurred?

_____ %

Q12 2.2. What are the most important factors that lead you to this assessment?

Q13 2.3. We're interested in how you think other experts on Syria and on U.S. government tools to prevent mass atrocities will answer these questions. This will allow us to look at whether you would be surprised by your peers' assessments. What do you think the average response of experts will be to Question 2.1?

_____ %

Q14 2.4. Were there other actions the U.S. government could have taken at the time that would have been more effective, in terms of reducing the number of civilian fatalities over the subsequent 12 months?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

Q15 2.4.a. Please specify.

Q16 2.5. Was there information available at the time that should have been given greater weight in the U.S. policy debate?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

Q17 2.5.a. Please specify.

Q18 Page 4/6 Policy Choice 3: Use airstrikes to enforce the “red line” against chemical weapons use? In August 2013, the Syrian government used chemical weapons on opposition-controlled areas near Damascus, killing hundreds of civilians. The Obama administration threatened limited, “standoff” military strikes to enforce the President’s “red line” against the Syrian government’s use of chemical weapons and to “deter and degrade” President Assad’s ability to use the weapons. President Obama announced on September 9, 2013, that the U.S. would delay strikes to pursue a Russian diplomatic initiative, which soon led to an agreement to remove Syrian chemical weapons stockpiles. Imagine that President Obama had ordered limited airstrikes against the Syrian government in September 2013, as had been planned before the Russian initiative.

Q19 3.1. In that scenario, what is the percent probability that the number of civilian fatalities in Syria over the subsequent 12 months would have been lower than actually occurred?

_____ %

Q20 3.2. What are the most important factors that lead you to this assessment?

Q21 3.3. We're interested in how you think other experts on Syria and on U.S. government tools to prevent mass atrocities will answer these questions. This will allow us to look at whether you would be surprised by your peers' assessments. What do you think the average response of experts will be to Question 3.1?

_____ %

Q22 3.4. Were there other actions the U.S. government could have taken at the time that would have been more effective, in terms of reducing the number of civilian fatalities over the subsequent 12 months?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

Q23 3.4.a. Please specify.

Q24 3.5. Was there information available at the time that should have been given greater weight in the U.S. policy debate?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

Q25 3.5.a. Please specify.

Q26 Page 5/6 Policy Choice 4: ISIS first or Assad first? In the wake of ISIS seizing control of territories in Iraq and Syria in the spring of 2014, the U.S. government debated possible changes to its Syria policy. One option considered was to work with Sunni partners to overthrow Assad and then work with the new Syrian regime to fight ISIS—in other words, “Assad first.” President Obama chose instead an “ISIS first” option, which focused on defeating the group in Iraq and de-escalating the conflict in Syria. On September 10, 2014, Obama announced a new international coalition to defeat ISIS. Imagine that President Obama had chosen the “Assad first” option in August 2014.

Q27 4.1. In that scenario, what is the percent probability that the number of civilian fatalities in Syria over the subsequent 12 months would have been lower than actually occurred?

_____ %

Q28 4.2. What are the most important factors that lead you to this assessment?

Q29 4.3. We're interested in how you think other experts on Syria and on U.S. government tools to prevent mass atrocities will answer these questions. This will allow us to look at whether you would be surprised by your peers' assessments. What do you think the average response of experts will be to Question 4.1?

_____ %

Q30 4.4. Were there other actions the U.S. government could have taken at the time that would have been more effective, in terms of reducing the number of civilian fatalities over the subsequent 12 months?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

Q31 4.4.a. Please specify.

Q32 4.5. Was there information available at the time that should have been given greater weight in the U.S. policy debate?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

Q33 4.5.a. Please specify.

Q34 Page 6/6 We have a few final questions that will help us explore how people think about U.S. government action to prevent mass atrocities in general.

Q35 5.1. Strategies to prevent mass atrocities can include efforts to impose costs on perpetrators and/or facilitate resolution of the underlying conflict. In general, where should the U.S. government focus its efforts?

- Imposing costs on perpetrators
- Both, with emphasis on imposing costs on perpetrators
- Both with equal emphasis
- Both, with emphasis on facilitating resolution of underlying conflict
- Facilitating resolution of underlying conflict

Q36 5.2. In general, how much influence does the U.S. government have on the likelihood of mass atrocities around the world?

- Not much
- Little
- Some
- Much
- A great deal

Q37 5.3. Which of the following statements describes you? Choose all that apply.

- I have expert knowledge about the conflict in Syria from 2011 - present
- I have expert knowledge about U.S. government strategies and tools to prevent mass atrocities
- I have first-hand knowledge of the U.S. government policy debates regarding Syria for some part of the period from 2011 - present
- I have other expertise that helped me assess the impact of alternative U.S. actions in Syria

Q38 5.3.a. Please specify your other relevant expertise.

Q39 5.4. Isaiah Berlin classified intellectuals as hedgehogs or foxes. The hedgehog knows one big thing and tries to explain as much as possible within that conceptual framework, whereas the fox knows many small things and is content to improvise explanations on a case-by-case basis. Do you place yourself towards the hedgehog or fox end of this scale?

- Hedgehog: I know one big thing and try to explain as much as possible within that conceptual framework.
- Fox: I know many small things and am content to improvise explanations on a case-by-case basis.

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The assertions, opinions, and conclusions in this occasional paper are those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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