
Critical Junctures in United States Policy toward Syria

An Assessment of the Counterfactuals

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

More than any other foreign policy crisis during the Obama administration's eight years, the Syrian conflict has engendered enormous debate about what the United States might have done differently: Could this catastrophe have been avoided? In particular, might different decisions at critical junctures in US policy debates have diminished the level of killing and atrocities? This paper explores these questions based primarily on interviews with former US officials and non-governmental Syria experts.

Four key factors shaped the policy debate:

- **Underestimating the durability of the Assad regime:** For many, Bashar al-Assad's downfall was a foregone conclusion. Informed by this fundamental miscalculation, the focus inside the US government was less about what it would take for Assad to go and more about how to manage the day after to prevent a chaotic transition.
- **Undervaluing the commitment of Assad's allies:** Analysts and policy makers did not foresee the depth of support by Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah to ensure the regime's survival. For Iran and Hezbollah, the stakes were existential, and both stakeholders proved willing to go all in on behalf of Assad.
- **Misjudging the possibility of containment:** As the Assad regime persisted and the conflict wore on, some US decision makers overestimated the capacity to contain the conflict.
- **Libya's overhang:** The US/NATO-led response in Libya adversely affected the calculations of many key stakeholders in the Syrian conflict: the Syrian regime, Russia, the opposition, and the Obama administration.

Five critical junctures and associated counterfactuals:

1. **Obama's August 2011 statement:** Most interviewed for this paper identified Obama's August 2011 statement that "the time has come for President Assad to step aside" as the most consequential juncture, the so-to-speak original sin. A more nuanced statement developed via a thorough interagency process and accompanied by a well-conceived strategy might have led to fewer atrocities.
2. **Clinton/Petraeus arming plan:** The summer 2012 decision not to adopt the Clinton/Petraeus plan to vet and arm "moderate" rebels is among the most contentious and yet least significant of the critical junctures with respect to the issue of minimizing

civilian deaths. Implementing the plan might have proven counterproductive by extending the duration of the conflict.

3. **Chemical weapons "red line":** Obama's September 2013 decision not to undertake standoff strikes to enforce his "red line" against the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons stands as his most controversial policy decision on Syria, and arguably of his entire presidency. Conducting limited stand-off strikes followed immediately by intensive diplomacy might have led to a reduction in the level of killing.
4. **Prioritizing ISIL over the Assad regime:** In the late summer 2014, following ISIL's "blitzkrieg" across Iraq and parts of Syria, the Obama administration made a formal strategic shift prioritizing Iraq and the fight against ISIL over counter-regime objectives in Syria. Implementing a more muscular anti-regime policy as part of a broader counter-ISIL strategy in Syria in 2014 is unlikely to have led to a lower level of atrocities against civilians.
5. **No-fly zone over all or part of Syria:** The option to enforce a no-fly zone over all or part of Syria has been raised at various times throughout the conflict, specifically in 2012, 2013, and 2015. More creative options for enforcing a partial no-fly zone—perhaps over northern Syria using standoff weapons or employing different tools—should have been given greater consideration.

Conclusions:

- **No silver bullet:** No single shift in policy options would have definitively led to a better outcome in terms of the level of atrocities in Syria.
- **Trade-offs in focusing on Assad rather than the conflict:** The options developed by US officials favored pressuring Assad over ending the conflict. Lowered expectations about the regime's fate might have allowed for more policy options and more successful early diplomacy, diminishing atrocities through alternate paths toward ending the conflict.
- **Asymmetrical stakes:** The regime and its allies responded to incremental increases in pressure by ratcheting up their response, pulling the conflict into a self-perpetuating cycle. For the Assad regime, hailing from a minority sect, the stakes were not merely losing power, but existential. These existential stakes prompted a win-at-all-costs approach by the regime, including the commission of atrocities and other war crimes.

- **Elusive “sweet spot” for use of force:** More emphasis should have been focused on developing creative uses of force to undergird diplomacy and to deter regime atrocities.
- **Deficiencies in the US policy process:** The US government policy process on Syria revealed clear areas for improvement in the arenas of policy innovation, policy analysis, and strategic decision making.

INTRODUCTION

Now in its seventh year, the conflict in Syria has exacted an enormous human toll. Syria's humanitarian crisis is the largest and most complex since World War II, with significant geopolitical stakes. The statistics are staggering: 500,000 people have died, the vast majority—at least 70 percent—civilians; the war has displaced half the population, 6.2 million internally, while more than 5 million Syrian refugees have fled to neighboring countries and beyond. Large-scale migrant flows to Europe, including a significant number of Syrian refugees, have upended European politics and reverberated globally, including in the United States.

The horrific nature of the violence has compounded the human suffering in Syria. Since its establishment in August 2011, the United Nations Human Rights Council's Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic—the longest inquiry at the United Nations—has documented extensive atrocities and human rights violations against civilians.¹ Warring parties stand accused of war crimes and other violations of international humanitarian law.

Acting with impunity, the Syrian regime and its allies have indiscriminately bombed civilian targets including hospitals and schools. These forces continue to rely on prohibited armaments including chemical weapons, incendiary bombs, and cluster munitions. Government forces also have besieged areas held by the opposition-held areas, obstructing humanitarian aid from reaching civilians in need. Armed groups have shelled civilian areas indiscriminately, albeit on a smaller scale. These groups also have undertaken summary executions and kidnappings, recruited child soldiers, and in the case of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) reportedly used chemical agents as well as subjected women and girls to sexual slavery and other abuses.²

More than any other foreign policy crisis during the eight years of Barack Obama's presidency, the Syrian conflict has engendered enormous criticism and second-guessing of the administration's policies. Critics blame the administration for not doing enough to forestall the killing and atrocities. They accuse the administration of dithering in the face of a conflict rapidly spiraling out of control.

¹ For a complete account of Commission of Inquiry reports, see <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/IICISyria/Pages/IndependentInternationalCommission.aspx>. In addition, human rights advocacy groups including Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and Physicians for Human Rights have produced numerous reports documenting abuses in the Syrian conflict.

² Barack Obama and his administration specifically used "Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant" to refer to the group.

Standing back from the Syrian tragedy, it is incumbent upon us to ask: Could this catastrophe have been avoided? In particular, from the vantage point of US policy on Syria, might different decisions at critical policy junctures have yielded a better outcome? If taken, would these alternate policy options have diminished the level of killing and atrocities?

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Supported by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Simon-Skjoldt Center for the Prevention of Genocide, this paper is part of a larger research project examining US government action in relation to the atrocities committed in Syria since 2011. The project seeks to conduct a systematic review of critical policy junctures in the Syrian conflict, identify alternative policies that the US government plausibly could have adopted at these junctures, and assess the likely effects of these counterfactual actions on the conflict and associated atrocities against civilians. A variety of methods—including formal modeling, expert consultations, and simulations—are being used to assess the counterfactual scenarios. This approach is designed to help narrow the uncertainty around the consequences of past policy decisions as compared with plausible counterfactual actions.

This paper provides the analytic narrative undergirding the overall project. It identifies "critical junctures" in US-Syria policy between 2011 and 2016, focusing on moments when US policy was more open to change, compared with periods of relative stability/continuity. External events or perceived changes in the conflict that demanded a US response often propelled these decision junctures. Internal policy advocacy by key actors and domestic political considerations also affect whether particular moments critical junctures.

The paper then describes the most prominent, plausible counterfactual policy options associated with each critical juncture. It assesses the likely consequences of the counterfactual options based on interviews with experts and former officials about the policy deliberations at the time, the key assumptions associated with counterfactual policy options, and knowledge about the dynamics of the conflict in Syria.

It is impossible to know definitively the alternate realities conjured by counterfactual analysis. By definition, these assessments sit squarely in the realm of speculation. Yet, with that caveat, a deeper understanding of the decisions not taken at these critical junctures might illuminate the track of an aspirational alternative trajectory for Syria—one that would not have featured the same degree of suffering and loss. By no means would this alternate path be guaranteed. Yet, a deeper understanding of US missteps in Syria and alternative outcomes could illuminate important insights for the next, inevitable, crisis to be faced by US policy makers.

Many US policy makers who worked on Syria from President Barack Obama down have engaged in this exercise of exploring counterfactuals, ruminating often on the question, "Could we have done something differently?" In a November 2016 interview, Obama noted that the situation in Syria "haunts me constantly ... I would say of all the things that have happened during the course of my presidency the knowledge that you have hundreds of thousands of

people who have been killed, millions who have been displaced, [makes me] ask myself what might I have done differently along the course of the last five, six years.”³ While the President dismissed the prospect of a different outcome with two well-known policy alternatives, arming and “pinprick” missile strikes, he lamented the possibility that something was missed: “Was there something that we hadn’t thought of? Was there some move that is beyond what was being presented to me that maybe a Churchill could have seen, or an Eisenhower might have figured out?”⁴

In several interviews conducted for this paper, Syria policy makers echoed the President’s anguish on Syria. Many noted how often they continue to think about decisions taken on Syria and whether a different path would have been possible. Many expressed genuine misgivings about the options chosen at specific critical junctures and wondered about the implications of paths not taken. Some found the discussions cathartic, while one former government official likened the interview to a “bad therapy session.”⁵

Research undertaken for this paper relied primarily on first-person interviews conducted across a broad spectrum of former US government officials involved in Syria policy making and non-government Syria experts. Specifically, the author interviewed approximately 20 former officials who worked on Syria from across administration, including the Department of State, the Department of Defense, and the White House, as well as ten non-government Syria experts. All interviewees were granted anonymity to allow them to discuss sensitive US policy deliberations on Syria freely. Where possible, their agency affiliation and seniority have been referenced. The author also reviewed relevant secondary literature to supplement this primary research.

These interviews yielded key insights but no agreement on potential actions that would have definitely led to a better outcome for Syria. Indeed many noted that different policy options might have changed the outcome in Syria, but not necessarily improved it. Many underscore the complexity of the conflict to conclude that the likelihood of peaceful change in Syria had been a distant prospect at best.

Others emphasize the relatively limited capacity of the United States to determine Syria’s trajectory. As a former senior government official explained, “We need to be humble here and understand that the Americans never controlled what was happening in Syria and could not turn

³ Doris Kearns Goodwin, “Barack Obama and Doris Kearns Goodwin: The Ultimate Exit Interview,” *Vanity Fair*, November 2016, <http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2016/09/barack-obama-doris-kearns-goodwin-interview>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Author interview with former US government official, March 28, 2017.

decisively what was happening on the ground. The Syrians, more than anyone else, had and have agency.”⁶

While no “silver bullet” policy leading to a better outcome in Syria exists, a deeper exploration of the counterfactuals surrounding five critical junctures in Syria policy making yields several important insights. For the purpose of this paper, “critical junctures” are defined as “*relatively* short periods of time during which there is a *substantially heightened* probability that agents’ choices will affect the outcome of interest.”⁷ In this instance, the “agents” are US policy makers and the “outcome of interest” is a reduction in killing and atrocities. These critical junctures in Syria policy making are distinct from critical junctures or inflection points in the conflict itself. At times, the policy junctures align with the conflict’s inflection points, while in other instances, for example, Russia’s September 2015 military intervention in Syria, key policy decisions were not in play.

This paper identifies five critical junctures in US-Syria policy that were the focus of author interviews. **The five critical junctures identified are:**

1. Obama’s statement, “For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside,” August 2011⁸
2. The decision to reject the Clinton/Petraeus Plan to vet and arm the rebels with the assistance of some neighboring states, Summer 2012⁹
3. The decision not to undertake limited, standoff strikes to enforce the “red line” crossed by the Assad regime following its use of chemical weapons, September 2013
4. The decision to pivot away from countering the Assad regime and to prioritize countering ISIL, September 2014
5. The decision not to enforce a No-fly zone (NFZ) over all or parts of Syria, 2012, 2013, and 2015

⁶ Author interview with former senior US government official, May 17, 2017.

⁷ Giovanni Kapoccia and R. Daniel Kelemen, “The Study of Critical Junctures: Theory, Narrative, and Counterfactuals in Historical Institutionalism,” *World Politics*, 59 (April 2007), 341–69.

⁸ For text of full statement and accompanying Executive Order, see <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/08/18/president-obama-future-syria-must-be-determined-its-people-president-bashar-al-assad>.

⁹ For initial reporting of the plan, see Michael R. Gordon and Mark Landler, “Backstage Glimpses of Clinton as Dogged Diplomat, Win or Lose,” the *New York Times*, February 2, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/03/us/politics/in-behind-scene-blows-and-triumphs-sense-of-clinton-future.html>.

CONTEXT

Before examining the counterfactuals associated with each of these critical junctures, understanding the context surrounding these key decision points is important. Two key contextual issues shaped Syria decision making and merit deeper discussion. First, significant analytic failings anchored in a fundamental miscalculation of the Syrian regime's resilience led to key policy shortcomings. Second, the US/NATO-led intervention in Libya following its uprising and eventual unraveling sharply influenced the decision making of many key stakeholders in the Syria conflict, including the United States.

Three Key Analytic Failings

1. Underestimating the durability of the Assad regime. The failure by government analysts and outside experts alike to accurately assess the durability of the Assad regime constitutes a foundational analytic failing which drove other misjudgments on Syria. For many, Bashar al-Assad's downfall was a foregone conclusion. He was "dead man walking," with little chance of survival. One former senior White House official noted that government analysts predicted his ouster by Christmas 2013.¹⁰

Informed by this fundamental miscalculation, the focus inside the US government was less on strategies to ensure Assad's exit and more on managing the day after to prevent a chaotic transition. Indeed, in the euphoric early days of the so-called "Arab Spring," many believed that Assad in Syria would go the way of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, both of whom were deposed through organic, *relatively* bloodless ousters. Many observers underestimated the brutality of Syria's *mukhabarat* (secret police) culture and the minority regime's existential stakes, putting Syria in a different category altogether from Tunisia and Egypt. Nor was there sufficient understanding of the Assad regime's decision making, termed a "black box" by one Syria expert.¹¹

2. Undervaluing the commitment of Assad's allies. Analysts and policy makers did not foresee the depth of support by Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah to insure the regime's survival. For Iran and Hezbollah, the stakes were existential. Both stakeholders proved willing to "go all in" on behalf of Assad. Russia's intentions were also "a huge blind spot," according to a former government official, noting that the US government did not anticipate Russia's intervention in Syria. Whenever the Syrian regime faced significant threats, these allies would double down on their support for the regime, meeting any escalation from the opposition with an even greater counter-escalation. Yet, these US adversaries' actions in Syria often were viewed through the prism of

¹⁰ Author interview with former senior White House official, March 31, 2017.

¹¹ Author interview with Syria expert, March 27, 2017.

the dilemmas and setbacks that would result from their engagement. According to this logic, Hezbollah's involvement in Syria would be bloody, costly, and turn its Lebanese base against it; the United States could "bleed" Iran in Syria, and Russia's intervention would drag it into a quagmire.

3. Misjudging the possibility of containment. Finally, as the Assad regime persisted and the conflict wore on, some US decision makers overestimated the US government's capacity to contain the conflict. The deepening conflict drew Syria's neighbors and a broadening array of non-state actors increasingly into its chaotic vortex. One Syria expert noted that in his discussions with administration officials, "They would say the conflict was containable despite all indications to the contrary."¹² A former senior State Department official noted that while the White House and Joint Chiefs of Staff assessed that the conflict could be contained, State was "never sanguine ... HRC thought it would turn into a total regional mess when we spoke in April 2012 ... We argued against the feasibility of containment and said the extremist problem and the refugee problem would grow."¹³

As the conflict morphed from uprising to civil war to regional proxy war, the spillover into neighboring countries, particularly refugee flows, compounded the suffering and heightened the strategic stakes in Syria. A former senior White House official noted, "We were treating the humanitarian challenge in Syria like every other challenge. We did not foresee the trajectory of everyone getting into boats [and heading to Europe]."¹⁴ Another former senior White House official stated there was a "hope that the conflict would burn itself out without any major US intervention."¹⁵

These analytic failings in turn led to a policy process that was perpetually behind the curve, according to many outside experts. This view holds that Syria policy makers were not sufficiently tuned into the evolution of the conflict and therefore were unable to anticipate key shifts on the ground. Some noted that as a result, the administration was "always playing catch up" and found itself faced with a diminishing set of increasingly bad policy options. "There were many courses of action that could have been taken but were not, or were put on the shelf. By the time these actions were picked back up, the context had changed."¹⁶

¹² Author interview with Syria expert, March 29, 2017.

¹³ Author correspondence with former senior State Department official, May 15, 2017.

¹⁴ Author interview with former senior White House official, April 10, 2017.

¹⁵ Author interview with former senior White House official, April 5, 2017.

¹⁶ Author interview with Syria expert, April 4, 2017.

Libya's Overhang

The US/NATO-led response in Libya adversely affected the calculations of many key stakeholders in the Syrian conflict: the Syrian regime, Russia, the opposition, and the Obama administration. As one Syria expert noted, “Across the board, Libya ends up being a very powerful lesson for all of the actors, contributing significantly to Syria’s trajectory ... It had a cascade effect.”¹⁷ Russia learned important lessons from its experience with Libya. The episode left Russia far less willing to work through the United Nations, leading to years of Russian obstruction and vetoes in Security Council deliberations on Syria. The Russians felt burned by their acquiescence to UN Security Council Resolution 1973 (2011) authorizing “all necessary measures” to protect civilians in Libya under Chapter VII of the UN charter which authorizes the use of force. The resolution paved the way for a broad civilian protection mission, including a no-fly zone, which precipitated a chain reaction of events resulting in the Libyan leader’s demise. Russia’s takeaway was that “The US will drive a truck through a UN security council resolution in order to push for regime change. Russia became clear that it would shield Assad 100 percent from any sort of Chapter VII action,” noted a former senior White House official.¹⁸

The Syrian regime drew cautionary notes from Muammar Gaddafi’s brutal demise, initially calibrating its violence against the opposition so as not to provoke a similar UN-led response. Later, confident of Russia’s veto in the UN Security Council, the regime significantly escalated its brutality. As another Syria expert noted, “Assad saw what happened to Gaddafi and said ‘Over my dead body, will they do that to me.’”¹⁹ Meanwhile, the Syrian opposition drew the opposite conclusion, with the UN resolution reinforcing its expectations for international support backed by the use of force, specifically a no-fly zone established for Syria.

Perhaps most importantly, the Libya precedent weighed heavily on US-Syria policy. One former senior advisor noted that President Obama “came off the intervention in Libya with the sense that it had not been the right choice, and he had opened a Pandora’s box.”²⁰ The president himself said in a 2016 interview, “So we actually executed this plan as well as I could have expected: We got a UN mandate, we built a coalition, it cost us \$1 billion—which, when it comes to military operations, is very cheap. We averted large-scale civilian casualties; we

¹⁷ Author interview with Syria expert, April 5, 2017.

¹⁸ Author interview with former senior White House official, March 31, 2017.

¹⁹ Author interview with Syria expert, April 4, 2017.

²⁰ Author interview with former senior White House official, April 10, 2017.

prevented what almost surely would have been a prolonged and bloody civil conflict. And despite all that, Libya is a mess.”²¹

The negative experience in Libya directly impacted the president’s view of military intervention in Syria. As one former senior White House official underscored, “Libya colored his thinking on all direct kinetic action in Syria.”²² Echoing the point, a Syria expert noted, “It reinforced Obama’s reticence ... the way the Libyan conflict spiraled after the intervention and the failure of institution building were a powerful lesson for Obama.”²³ More broadly, the Libya experience “stigmatized the humanitarian/R2P [Responsibility to Protect] argument. It led to the conclusion that it is almost impossible to undertake a civilian protection mission that is surgical and limited in scope.”²⁴

²¹ Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” the *Atlantic*, April 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

²² Author interview with former senior White House official, April 14, 2017.

²³ Author interview with Syria expert, April 5, 2017.

²⁴ Author interview with former senior White House official, April 10, 2017.

CRITICAL JUNCTURES AND COUNTERFACTUALS

Critical Juncture 1: President Obama’s Statement that “Assad must step aside” (August 2011)

The Original Sin

Nearly six months into Syria’s uprising, pressure was mounting on Obama to stake a position on Syria.²⁵ The Syrian regime was relying increasingly on the use of disproportionate force to quell largely peaceful protests that had started in the southern town of Dera’a but were spreading rapidly across the country. Civilian protection concerns were growing. The UN Human Rights Council had condemned Syria, and both the United States and the European Union had tightened sanctions against the regime. Many observers compared Syria to Egypt and Libya, where the United States had assumed a more forward-leaning posture, asking why the White House did not take a more proactive stance against the Syrian regime.

A preponderance of those interviewed for this paper identified Obama’s August 2011 statement that “the time has come for President Assad to step aside” as the most consequential Syria policy critical juncture. As a former senior government official stated, “It was the first misstep, which colored the rest of the conflict in a devastating manner.”²⁶ A former senior White House official noted, “If there’s one thing that may have made a difference, it’s that initial statement.”²⁷ As the first significant policy pronouncement on Syria, this policy juncture set the course for Obama administration policy on Syria over the next several years. Interpreted as a call for regime change, this policy decision potentially foreclosed other policy options that might have placed less emphasis on Assad’s demise. The President’s statement was accompanied by increased economic sanctions, but the measures certainly did not constitute, nor were intended to be, a strategy for regime change.

Obama, along with other senior advisors, has insisted that the statement was not intended as a signal that the White House would embark on a policy of regime change in Syria. Informed by faulty analysis that the Assad regime would not survive, the president’s statement was intended to place the United States on the right side of history. Moreover, the statement came after months of pressure building for the United States to pronounce on Syria. As one former senior White House official noted, “He called for Mubarak to go, why not Assad?” Yet, he continued, “he was

²⁵ Obama mentioned Assad in a May 2011 speech at the State Department, noting “President Assad now has a choice: he can lead the transition or get out of the way,” reflecting a view that the Syrian regime was still capable of reform.

²⁶ Author interview with former senior government official, March 29, 2017.

²⁷ Author interview with former senior White House official, March 31, 2017.

afraid that there would be an obligation to act on the words. When he finally does it, it's because he feels we look too hypocritical otherwise."²⁸

In his April 2016 *Atlantic* interview, the President underscored, "Oftentimes when you get critics of our Syria policy, one of the things that they'll point out is 'You called for Assad to go, but you didn't force him to go. You did not invade.' And the notion is that if you weren't going to overthrow the regime, you shouldn't have said anything. That's a weird argument to me, the notion that if we use our moral authority to say 'This is a brutal regime, and this is not how a leader should treat his people,' once you do that, you are obliged to invade the country and install a government you prefer."²⁹

Another former senior White House official echoed the President's sentiment, observing that the statement "was more in line with his Cairo 2009 speech, noting that we would lean into organic demands for change that come from within a society. Obama never saw himself signing up for regime change. He was making a moral statement."³⁰ A former senior State Department official underscored that the US policy objective was managed transition via negotiations, noting public statements by the US government that "Syrians would decide, not Americans. Our opinion was that Assad should go but Syrians would decide. That is a nuance that some officials, much less journalists, could never get."³¹

While perhaps intended as an expression of US moral authority, the statement was clearly perceived as a call for regime change, both within the US government as well as among US allies and adversaries on Syria. A former government official noted, "I remember stopping in my tracks and looking at my Blackberry saying, 'Wow! Did we just announce a policy of regime change in Syria?'" These critics argue that lacking a clear plan, the president's statement amounted to a declaratory policy without a strategy, tools, resources, or leverage to implement it. "We essentially backed into regime change, calling for regime change without a real plan to back it up," noted a former senior White House official.³²

Driven by political rather than policy imperatives, this critical policy juncture embodies a theme that would haunt Syria policy later in the Obama administration: political imperatives overriding policy considerations. The decision for Obama to make the statement reflected an instance of his inner circle of political advisors trumping policy experts. The US ambassador to Syria, like his French and British counterparts in Damascus, was wary of calling for Assad to go, noting the

²⁸ Author interview with former senior White House official, April 21, 2017.

²⁹ Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine."

³⁰ Author interview with former senior White House official, April 14, 2017.

³¹ Author correspondence with former senior State Department official, May 15, 2017.

³² Author interview with former senior White House official, April 10, 2017.

difficulty in achieving this goal. A former senior government official termed the ill-fated statement, “A PR fuckup of the highest order.”³³

The Counterfactuals

Counterfactual 1: Make the statement, but back it up with a well-conceived and well-resourced strategy. Advocates of this counterfactual called for the development of a robust regime change strategy using a mixture of military and non-military measures. The assumption undergirding this counterfactual focuses on minimizing the killing by removing Assad as the key perpetrator behind Syria’s killing and atrocities, stressing the importance of aggressively pursuing regime change. Some assumed that in making the statement the President would commit to action. As one former senior State Department official noted, “Not necessarily invasion and occupation, but other means.”³⁴ Proponents of this policy option favored an earlier and more intense use of indirect military intervention, primarily by arming the rebels, or direct action short of outright invasion.

It is hard to imagine the viability of this counterfactual given Obama’s antipathy toward regime change and his election vow to withdraw America from Middle East conflicts, not engage in a new one. Moreover, given the challenge and complexity of regime change in Syria, it is difficult to envision how this approach, to be successful, would not have required fairly massive military intervention, resulting in potentially far higher civilian deaths.

Counterfactual 2: Make a far more nuanced statement that does not box the administration in to a regime change strategy in Syria. This counterfactual assumes that regime change in Syria would be extremely difficult, with far more uncertain outcomes. It instead favors the development of other options to defuse the Syrian crisis without deposing the Assad regime. This counterfactual places less emphasis on Assad’s immediate removal and focuses more on developing options that would forestall Syria’s descent into conflict. More nuanced options might have included the pursuit of a negotiated deal resulting in a transitional government that included many members of the Assad regime.

Critics of the August 2011 statement note that it boxed in the Obama administration’s Syria policy, foreclosing more creative options. In this view, the statement necessarily undermined early efforts at diplomacy. Political negotiations become extremely difficult when framed in the

³³ Author interview with former senior government official, March 29, 2017.

³⁴ Author interview with former senior government official, April 21, 2017.

context of regime change. “You can’t negotiate successfully with the guy you are working to unseat,” noted a former senior government official.³⁵

While a few advocated not making any statement, most concede that US silence on Syria was not a viable option. Instead, this counterfactual envisions a more nuanced statement on Syria, clarifying how and to what extent the United States would engage, specifying the limits of US involvement, and laying out clear expectations and benchmarks for Syrian opposition groups in order for them to gain US support. The statement might have placed less emphasis on Assad and more on the root issues driving discontent in Syria and how to address them.

In one variant of this counterfactual, a former senior State Department official noted, “The Syrian opposition was underground mostly in August 2011. We should have laid out our vision of Syria at that time in a way the opposition could not. We should have specifically separated the pillars of the regime from Assad and insisted that we could only support an opposition that did the same—no retaliation, no Gaddafi-style end.”³⁶

The president could have used the statement to shape expectations within a broader context of winding down US military commitments in the region and placing a greater emphasis on diplomacy, particularly in the first year of the conflict when the window for diplomacy was most promising.

A more nuanced statement might have opened up greater avenues for negotiation during the initial foray into diplomacy led by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan.³⁷ With a more nuanced statement that did not insist outright on Assad’s departure, some speculate that the 2012 Geneva process might have been more successful. As one former senior White House official noted, “If we had been more willing to lower the bar in Geneva and had pushed for a solution that would have involved more devolution of power ... but we were too convinced of the need for Assad to go.”³⁸

While views differ on which counterfactual might have resulted in a better outcome on Syria, the lack of a rigorous interagency process at this critical juncture stands out as a key failing. Many lamented the absence of interagency deliberation over the statement, noting that it could have undertaken a deeper dive on potential options and scrubbed the statement to better calibrate it to the United States’ interest, goals and intentions.

³⁵ Author interview with former senior government official, March 29, 2017.

³⁶ Author correspondence with former senior State Department official, May 15, 2017.

³⁷ Known as Geneva I, the process ultimately collapsed in early July 2012, marking a critical inflection point in the conflict and Syria’s descent into all-out civil war.

³⁸ Author interview with former senior White House official, March 31, 2017.

A former midlevel government official underscored the lost opportunity to engage the interagency policy process on a number of key questions: “Can we back the statement? Are there private things we can do? There could have been a discussion and calibration of the public statement to provide guidelines for the stance the US was going to take. Was the president the right messenger? Should it have been the secretary of state? The interagency discussion was never had.”³⁹

Conclusion: A more nuanced statement developed via a thorough interagency process and accompanied by a well-conceived strategy might have led to a better outcome with a diminished level of killing.

Engaging the interagency process early on to develop a more nuanced statement on Syria and an implementation strategy might have led to a better outcome. A more nuanced statement by Obama (or perhaps by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton instead) would have been a viable and more realistic option. At a minimum, a more nuanced statement that did not convey an empty threat of regime change would have created greater policy latitude to explore more creative options, particularly in the sphere of diplomacy. Such a statement also would have avoided raising false hopes among the Syrian opposition, deemed a “moral hazard” by one US government official. It might have avoided the breach of trust and damage to US credibility among the Syrian opposition and regional allies whose expectations for greater US engagement in Syria remained unmet. Ideally, a more nuanced statement would have been anchored in a realistic strategy for Syria that reflected US intentions, capabilities, and constraints. Such a statement might have led to more creative and flexible diplomatic options that could have diminished the duration and ferocity of the conflict, sparing civilian lives in the process.

³⁹ Author interview with former midlevel government official, March 30, 2017.

Critical Juncture 2: The decision to reject the Clinton-Petraeus Plan to arm the rebels (Summer 2012)

A Lightning Rod Decision Point

By the summer of 2012, Syria had descended into civil war. The collapse of a six-point peace plan shepherded by UN special envoy Kofi Annan envisioning a Syrian-led transition heralded a new phase of intensified violence.⁴⁰ A mid-July bombing in Damascus killed three senior security officials, including the president's brother-in-law, a key member of his inner circle. Amid rumors of increasing military defections, many thought the regime's hold on power was slipping.⁴¹ Almost simultaneously, rebels seized a portion of Aleppo, thrusting Syria's second-largest city into the conflict. While calls to arm the opposition were already part of the policy discourse on Syria, these demands gained momentum as Syria spiraled deeper into civil war. A July 28, 2012, *Washington Post* editorial typifies of this view, noting, "Instead of providing only non-lethal support, such as medical supplies and communications gear, America could help supply weapons to the outgunned opposition fighters."⁴²

The decision not to adopt the Clinton-Petraeus plan to vet and arm "moderate" rebels is among the most contentious and yet least significant of the critical junctures with respect to the issue of minimizing civilian deaths. The arming plan was supported by key principals including the secretaries of state and defense, the CIA director, and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Yet, other senior officials, and most notably the president, remained skeptical.⁴³ A series of still-classified studies assessing the success of previous covert arming efforts only reinforced their doubts.⁴⁴ Obama's decision to reject the plan did not end the debate on arming the rebels, but it laid a marker that underscored his continuing discomfort with the proposition.

⁴⁰ The international Action Group assembled to help implement the plan had purposely left Assad's fate ambiguous, calling for a "transitional governing body" with "full executive powers" formed by mutual consent. The June 30 Communique is available at <http://i.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2012/images/06/30/FinalCommuniqueActionGroupforSyria.pdf>.

⁴¹ Liz Sly and Babak Dehghanpisheh, "Syrian Violence Escalates in Damascus after Rebel Bombing Kills Three Assad Aides," the *Washington Post*, July 19, 2012. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/ap-syrian-state-media-says-defense-minister-killed-in-suicide-bombing/2012/07/18/gJQANz7AtW_story.html.

⁴² "A Time for Leadership on Syria," the *Washington Post*, July 28, 2012. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/a-time-for-leadership-on-syria/2012/07/27/gJOA2v8mEX_story.html.

⁴³ Mark Mazzetti, Robert F. Worth, and Michael R. Gordon, "Obama's Uncertain Path Amid Syria Bloodshed," the *New York Times*, October 22, 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/23/world/middleeast/obamas-uncertain-path-amid-syria-bloodshed.html>.

⁴⁴ Mark Mazzetti, "CIA Study of Covert Aid Fueled Skepticism About Helping Syrian Rebels," the *New York Times*, October 14, 2014. https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/15/us/politics/cia-study-says-arming-rebels-seldom-works.html?_r=0.

Some viewed the plan as a “sacred cow” that might have turned the tide more quickly in favor of the opposition or pressured the regime to the negotiating table. Others considered the plan “an alternative to direct military action, which the Obama administration couldn’t stomach. Indirect action doesn’t cost as much, but it’s harder to control. Direct military action is the opposite.”⁴⁵

If press reports are accurate, a covert-arming plan was initiated beginning in April 2013, eight months after the Clinton/Petraeus plan was rejected.⁴⁶ In effect, the administration ended up arming moderate rebel factions as envisioned by the Clinton/Petraeus plan, only later. Neither the Clinton/Petraeus plan nor the reported covert program included the provision of game-changing sophisticated weapons, particularly surface-to-air missiles and sophisticated night-fighting equipment.

As such, this critical juncture is less momentous because the principal area of contention is whether arming *earlier* would have made a substantial difference in influencing the nature of the armed opposition, the ability to manage Persian Gulf allies’ arming efforts, and the opposition’s capacity to pressure the regime sufficiently to shift the strategic calculus toward negotiating a settlement.

The Counterfactual

Implement the Clinton/Petraeus Plan. Proponents of implementing the plan assume arming earlier would have led to more successful efforts to unify the armed groups, diminished the influence of extremists, improved oversight of weapons flows, and pressured the regime and its allies sufficiently to bring them to the negotiating table. In this view, arming earlier in the summer of 2012 “would have strengthened the armed groups’ unity, serving as a pull factor to bring them together and under us.”⁴⁷ This counterfactual holds that less influence would have been ceded to Gulf allies, considered “a huge mistake because their interests were different. They viewed the Salafist organizations differently than we did. Those groups were a ‘chip off the old block’ for the Gulf.”⁴⁸ As a former senior White House official noted, “The Gulfies were a disaster with their support for Al Nusra and the sectarian dimension to it as well.”⁴⁹

Earlier arming would have mitigated the “chaotic way of regional states, which led to the impossibility of unifying the armed groups.”⁵⁰ A former senior government official emphasized

⁴⁵ Author interview with Syria expert, April 4, 2017.

⁴⁶ Mazzetti, Worth, and Gordon, “Obama’s Uncertain Path Amid Syria Bloodshed.”

⁴⁷ Author interview with former midlevel government official, March 28, 2017.

⁴⁸ Author interview with Syria expert, April 4, 2017.

⁴⁹ Author interview with former senior White House official, April 10, 2017.

⁵⁰ Author interview with Syria expert, April 3, 2017.

that a plan that “lashed up” the Turks, Saudis, and Qataris, funneling arms through a single source rather than multiple patrons, would have provided greater cohesion.⁵¹

Arming earlier also might have minimized the influence of more radical elements, with one Syria expert noting that 2011 was a “formative period for the armed opposition. Real radicalization did not start until 2013.”⁵² However, views differ significantly on when the radicalization of the armed opposition began, with some experts and former government officials putting the timeframe much earlier.

Advocates of this counterfactual also underscore that implementing the Clinton/Petraeus plan rapidly and with conviction would have been critical to its success. They contrast this element of the counterfactual with the reality of the reported covert program. “Ultimately, they [the Obama administration] go half-heartedly, using an agency which doesn’t have the ability to scale things sufficiently to make a difference. They go in there in a way that avoids the US exercising leadership over an effort that involves other actors as well ... We ultimately got in, but didn’t pound the table saying ‘Now, we’re in charge and we’re going to say who gets what.’”⁵³

A former senior White House official echoed these concerns, “When the decision was finally made to provide lethal assistance, the pace at which it was pursued was glacial. There was no real commitment. There was a great deal of caution and the whole focus was on the cost of action.”⁵⁴ Another former senior government official underscored, “We ended up with a self-fulfilling prophesy.” The official continued by noting that some senior policy makers considered moderate elements too weak and the senior policy makers were therefore not comfortable providing more weapons to them, contributing to their weakness.⁵⁵ More broadly, some former government officials emphasize that to be effective, an arming program must be overt, rather than covert, thereby allowing for strong political and strategic messaging components.

At the same time, many who favored the Clinton/Petraeus plan acknowledge that the armed opposition’s fragmentation and radicalization had already set in by 2012, just a few months after the plan was rejected. Describing his last trip into Syria in November 2012, a Syria expert and arming proponent said, “I saw how chaotic it was. No one was in charge ... there were black flags at the crossing and every hilltop had a different *katibah* [battalion] ... I

⁵¹ Author interview with former senior government official, May 17, 2017.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Author interview with former senior government official, April 21, 2017.

⁵⁴ Author interview with former senior White House official, April 21, 2017.

⁵⁵ Author interview with former senior government official, May 17, 2017.

realized it was far more chaotic than I thought ... Syria was breaking down and filling up with DTOs (designated terrorist organizations).”⁵⁶

Another Syria expert referenced the growing influence of the Nusra Front, the Al Qaeda affiliate in Syria.⁵⁷ Visiting the southern Turkish province of Hatay in November 2012, this Syria expert noted “I remember meeting with the representatives of different fighting groups, and everybody was saying that the Nusra Front are the real fighters. Everybody wanted to work with them because they could close the deal in battles.”⁵⁸

Moreover, the corruption and fecklessness of many moderate armed elements that the United States was willing to work with was also becoming an issue. An ardent supporter of arming noted, “The rot had set in from mid to late 2012 onwards and we ended up with warlords supported by Gulf patrons who had their favorites.”⁵⁹

For others, the question of whether the plan would have facilitated the formation of a unified, moderate opposition is less important than the possibility that implementing the plan would have shifted the strategic calculus of the regime and its allies. This component of the counterfactual underscores arming rebels just enough to “bring the regime to the negotiating table,” a view that also informed the eventual covert plan that was adopted.

However, the logic of relying on this type of *limited* military intervention to achieve a negotiated settlement is belied by empirical data. Numerous studies suggest that the provision of external support and third-party involvement in civil wars prolongs conflict and potentially increases the prospect that atrocities will be committed.^{60, 61} In the Syria context, instead of accelerating toward negotiations, arming was met by counter-escalation on the other side and a deepening of the conflict. On the key issue of minimizing the level of killing, the vast majority of those interviewed would not commit to the notion that implementing the Clinton/Petraeus plan would have resulted in a better outcome. At best, some posit that arming sooner and more intensively might have shortened the duration of the conflict but resulted in a spike in the killing.

⁵⁶ Author interview with Syria expert, April 4, 2017.

⁵⁷ The Nusra Front announced its formation in Syria in January 2012.

⁵⁸ Author interview with Syria expert, March 27, 2017.

⁵⁹ Author interview with Syria expert, March 29, 2017.

⁶⁰ For a summary of recent research on third-party interventions in civil wars, see Andrew Enterline and Christopher Linebarger, “Win, Lose, or Draw: Third Party Intervention and the Duration and Outcome of Civil Wars,” in T. David Mason and Sara McLaughlin Mitchell, eds., *What Do We Know about Civil Wars* (Landham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), 93–108.

⁶¹ Multiple studies have identified violent conflict and instability as an important risk factor for the onset of mass atrocities. For one recent study, see Jay Ulfelder and Benjamin Valentino, “Assessing Risks of State-Sponsored Mass Killing” (Washington, DC: Political Instability Task Force, 2008), accessible at https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1703426.

Conclusion: Implementing the Clinton/Petraeus Plan would not have led to a better outcome and might have been counterproductive by potentially extending the duration of the conflict.

The arming debate on Syria was extremely polarized. Opinions remain deeply divided on whether implementing the Clinton/Petraeus plan—while clearly a viable option—would have led to an effective, unified and moderate armed opposition. Even the plan’s advocates acknowledge doubts, particularly in reference to the United States’ track record on arming rebels. “We’re not good at it, and we simply haven’t cracked the code on how to do this. I’m very skeptical that even if we had made a decision to implement the plan, I’m not sure whether it would have had a definitive impact.”⁶²

Other former Obama administration officials underscore that arming might have contributed to an escalatory cycle, further deepening the conflict. In one example of this perspective, former senior White House advisor Phil Gordon writes

Many of those who accept that direct US force may not be the way forward still look to increased arming and training of opposition fighters as the best way to increase pressure on the regime. But it should by now be clear how difficult it was always going to be for the United States and its partners to identify, arm and train a ‘moderate’ opposition that would violently wrest power from a standing power backed by Iran, Russia and Hezbollah. ... We will never know if earlier support to the armed opposition would have led to a rapid regime change and spared Syria from civil war; but it is logically difficult to understand why efforts to overthrow the regime then would not have led to the same degree of relentless counter-escalation we saw later, or why it would have been more successful when the regime forces were fresh and the opposition was in its infancy than they have been since.⁶³

Notes one former senior White House advisor, “People argue we should have supported the opposition more and sooner. We did quite a lot with arming. What we saw was counter-escalation, not capitulation.”⁶⁴ Another former senior White House advisor noted, “The notion that we could provide enough weapons to push Assad to sue for peace was not going to happen. When he nearly fell in 2015, he didn’t come to the negotiating table, instead he called Qasem

⁶² Author interview with former senior White House official, April 10, 2017.

⁶³ Philip Gordon, “It’s Time to Rethink Syria,” *Politico*, September 25, 2015. <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/09/its-time-to-rethink-syria-213184>.

⁶⁴ Author interview with former senior White House official, March 31, 2017.

Suleimani in Iran and the Russians in. When he's on the verge of collapse, does he go to Geneva? No he calls on Iran and Russia and they double down."⁶⁵

Implementing the Clinton/Petraeus plan earlier in August 2012 would not have diminished the level of killing or shortened the duration of the conflict. As conceived, the plan did not envision providing overwhelming support to the rebels to precipitate regime change. Instead, the plan hoped to provide greater cohesion to the fractious armed groups, counter growing radicalization, and shift the regime's calculus in favor of a negotiated settlement. Based on the outcome of the subsequent covert plan as well as empirical evidence on civil wars and civilian casualties, little evidence suggests that adoption of the Clinton/Petraeus plan would have achieved these goals. If anything, a strong case—based on empirical data—could be made that arming the rebels contributed to prolonging the civil war and increasing civilian casualties.

Critical Juncture 3: The decision not to take limited, standoff weapons strikes to enforce the chemical weapons “red line” (September 2013)

A Watershed Moment?

On August 21, 2013, the Syrian regime carried out a large-scale chemical weapons attack in the Damascus suburbs of eastern Ghouta. The attack, using the prohibited nerve agent sarin, killed more than one thousand Syrian civilians, including hundreds of children. Several days after the attack, the White House released a government intelligence assessment assessing with “high confidence that the Syrian government carried out a chemical weapons attack”⁶⁶

Nearly one year prior to the regime's deadly chemical weapons assault, Obama had established the now famous “red line,” warning that any attempt by Syria to move or use chemical weapons would “change my calculus” regarding US military intervention in Syria.⁶⁷

The disposition of Syria's chemical weapons—estimated to have been among the largest chemical weapons stockpiles in the world—was an abiding concern of the Obama administration since the earliest days of the conflict. As a former senior government official noted, “The number one issue by far was the CW. That's what threatened US national security interests.”⁶⁸

Obama administration thinking on Syrian chemical weapons also was influenced by its experience in Libya, where the administration was faced with the challenge of securing

⁶⁵ Author interview with former senior White House official, April 14, 2017.

⁶⁶ For the official US government assessment, see <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/08/30/government-assessment-syrian-government-s-use-chemical-weapons-august-21>.

⁶⁷ James Ball, “Obama Issues ‘Red Line’ Warning on Chemical Weapons,” the *Washington Post*, August 20, 2012.

⁶⁸ Author interview with former senior government official, May 17, 2017.

thousands of MANPADS (man-portable air-defense systems) that were on the loose following the collapse of the Gaddafi regime. Administration officials worried about the prospect of extremist groups gaining access to chemical munitions in Syria or the loss of control over the stockpile given the level of instability there.

Obama’s September 2013 decision not to undertake standoff strikes to enforce his “red line” against the Assad regime’s use of chemical weapons stands as his most controversial policy decision on Syria, and arguably of his entire presidency. The decision marked a dramatic, last-minute policy reversal. Its impact on the trajectory of the conflict continues to be debated, but the strikes might have been game changing.

Following emergency deliberations and unanimous agreement among principals of the National Security Council, preparations were made for an imminent US military response.⁶⁹ Yet, in a surprising turnaround, Obama—spooked by the lack of legal basis, Congressional authorization, or popular or allied support—made a last-minute decision to seek Congressional approval for the strikes.⁷⁰ In yet another dramatic turn, a remark by Secretary of State John Kerry that the strikes could be forestalled by Assad’s agreement to relinquish his chemical weapons stockpile led to a US-Russian diplomatic initiative to remove Syria’s chemical weapons stockpile. Under the credible threat of US military intervention in Syria, Moscow agreed to force Assad to comply with the US demand. In January 2016, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) announced that all of Syria’s declared chemical weapons stockpile had been destroyed, following its removal from the country in June 2014.⁷¹ In November 2016, the OPCW expressed “grave concern about and condemns in the strongest possible terms the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic,” noting that both the Syrian regime and ISIL had “been involved in the use of chemical weapons and toxic chemicals as weapons.”⁷²

The “red line” incident garnered enormous controversy even before an April 2017 sarin gas attack by the Syrian regime killed more than 80 civilians in Idlib governorate. Some labeled the episode a rare success in US-Syria policy making, noting that the president’s decision led to the removal of Syria’s known chemical weapons stockpile without resorting to military force.⁷³ “If

⁶⁹ For greater detail on the “red line” incident, see Derek Chollet, *The Long Game: How Obama Defied Washington and Redefined America’s Role in the World* (2016) New York: Public Affairs, 1–26.

⁷⁰ See Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” for additional details.

⁷¹ The OPCW was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2013.

⁷² Press statement by OPCW, November 11, 2016. <https://www.opcw.org/news/article/opcw-executive-council-adopts-decision-regarding-the-opcw-United-nations-joint-investigative-mechanism-reports-about-chemical-weapons-use-in-the-syrian-arab-republic/>.

⁷³ Derek Chollet, “Obama’s Red Line Revisited,” *Politico*, July 19, 2016.

<http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/07/obama-syria-foreign-policy-red-line-revisited-214059>.

we had not done the 2013 deal, we would be having a conversation today about the unbelievable CW problem we have in Syria.”⁷⁴

Others deemed it a stain on the Obama presidency that would forever taint his reputation. The president noted it “was as tough a decision as I’ve made—and I believe ultimately it was the right decision to make.”⁷⁵ While some noted that the decision marked another instance of political considerations overriding the policy, several of those interviewed were sympathetic to the president’s decision to seek Congressional approval. “Going to Congress was not cynical. It felt that it was going to be potentially bigger and needed Congressional support.”⁷⁶

Others underscored that some critiques of the president’s decision are unfair because they conflate a narrowly defined objective to enforce the international norm against chemical weapons use with a broader mission of regime change. In this view, “Obama got the best deal he could. He was absolutely right. He framed it not as solving the civil war, but instead upholding international norms by getting rid of Syria’s chemical weapons ... The opposition wanted it as a showdown moment, but that was never in the cards. They said Obama blinked, but he blinked years before.”⁷⁷

The Counterfactual

Undertake limited standoff missile strikes. This counterfactual is derived directly from details of the planned Tomahawk missile strikes that Obama ultimately aborted. Fired from five US destroyers in the Mediterranean, the attack would have ensued over 72 hours with a target list of more than 50 sites.⁷⁸ Its intended mission was not regime change, but enforcement of the “red line” and the re-establishment of deterrence against chemical weapons use.

Advocates of this counterfactual cite three key outcomes that might have resulted from a decision to follow through on the planned missile strike:

1. **Deterrence:** First, they assume the strikes would have signaled the Assad regime that it could not act with impunity and that the commission of atrocities such as the use of chemical weapons would not stand.
2. **Reset:** A second argument in favor of the strikes assumes that such action could have constituted a “reset” in the conflict, a potential watershed event that might have paved

⁷⁴ Author interview with former senior government official, May 17, 2017.

⁷⁵ Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine.”

⁷⁶ Author interview with former senior White House official, April 10, 2017.

⁷⁷ Author interview with Syria expert, March 30, 2017.

⁷⁸ Chollet, *The Long Game*, 3.

the way for negotiations and forestalled Russia's eventual decision to intervene militarily in Syria.

3. **Global Power Projection:** The third outcome envisioned by proponents of this counterfactual revolves around US power projection globally. This view focuses on the reputational damage to the United States by not undertaking the strikes. As such, the value of the strikes not only concerns Syria, but also signaling to both allies and adversaries that the US follows through on its stated intentions. For example, a forceful US response might have forestalled more aggressive Russian behavior in Crimea and Ukraine. As one former official stated, "Superpowers don't lie."

Of the three outcomes, the third is less relevant to this paper as it does not address Syria. The first two merit deeper exploration on the question of the impact with respect to killing and atrocities. Proponents of the first outcome—deterrence of atrocities—argue that by not responding to Assad's chemical weapons attack, the United States gave Assad an implicit green light to commit further atrocities. "It definitely sent a message of impunity to the regime and bred a lot of cynicism within the humanitarian community. It opened the door ... anything short of a sarin attack is not going to be addressed."⁷⁹

A midlevel government official underscored, "once the Assad regime realized that they had crossed a red line and there was no response from the US, no retaliation, it became open season in Syria. The regime decided it could do anything it wanted."⁸⁰ Others note that "Assad had been deploying ever more violent weapons incrementally, seemingly gauging international reaction before each subsequent escalation in force."⁸¹ A United States response would have reinforced global norms against the use of chemical weapons.

The counter-argument to the deterrence outcome emphasizes the potential military escalation that might have resulted from US missile strikes against the Syrian regime as well as concern that Syria would have retained its chemical weapons stockpile. This argument underscores the "slippery slope" aspect of military engagement, raising unanswerable questions of whether the strikes might have provoked regime retaliation, additional chemical weapons attacks, or wider internal instability and chaos—any of which would have cost more civilian lives and potentially led to more open-ended US military intervention.

⁷⁹ Author interview with former senior government official, March 22, 2017.

⁸⁰ Author interview with midlevel government official, March 28, 2017.

⁸¹ Lina Khatib, et al., "Western Policy Towards Syria: Applying Lessons Learned," Research Paper, Chatham House Middle East and North Africa Program, March 2017. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/western-policy-towards-syria-applying-lessons-learned>.

In particular, some noted concern that the missile strikes could have opened up new battle fronts inside Damascus or other regime strongholds. Some proponents of this counter-argument ascribe the increase in regime attacks on civilians following the September 2013 critical juncture to regime counter-escalation following a significant uptick in arming by Gulf countries that were outraged by Obama's decision.⁸² Others point to the prospect for broader regional instability as US military intervention in Syria might have been met by Iranian-backed retaliatory measures in Iraq, Yemen, or Lebanon.

The second potential outcome—a reset of the conflict and movement toward negotiations—appears to be a lower-probability, but high-payoff scenario. To be successful, this scenario would require a “hail Mary” play—deploying just enough military intervention to rattle the regime and get the attention of its allies, without provoking wider escalation, *and* must have been followed by intensive diplomacy. These diplomatic efforts would, at a minimum, deescalate the conflict and ideally initiate genuine discussions around regime transition. In its more modest form, this outcome “would not have changed the overall trajectory, but would have given us a stronger hand to initiate diplomacy. The strikes could have pivoted quickly to a diplomatic play ... reinvigorating the Geneva process.”⁸³ Others agree that the standoff strikes could have shifted Russia's and Iran's calculus, creating new avenues for diplomacy.

Conclusion: Conducting limited stand-off strikes followed immediately by intensive diplomacy could have been a watershed event, improving the conflict's outcome with respect to the level of killing and atrocities.

On balance, a defensible argument can be made in favor of this counterfactual leading to a diminution of killing and atrocities. The strikes would necessarily need to achieve a balance of being meaningful without drawing the United States deeper into the conflict and leading to broader escalation on the ground. The strikes also would need to unnerve the regime sufficiently and force both Russia and Iran to change their calculus vis-à-vis support for the regime. Intensive diplomacy that engaged both Russia and Iran would need to follow military action. It would be essential to leverage the credible threat of military force to seek the removal of Syria's chemical weapons stockpile.

An admittedly difficult and risky strategy, this approach could have had the intended effects of preserving US credibility, enforcing an international norm against the use of chemical weapons, and leveraging military action to reset the conflict and move toward a new paradigm focused on diplomacy. Taken together, these impacts would have led to a diminution in violence and a curb on killing and atrocities.

⁸² Author interview with former senior White House official, March 31, 2017.

⁸³ Author interview with former senior White House official, April 10, 2017.

Critical Juncture 4: The decision to pivot away from countering the Assad regime and instead to prioritize countering ISIL (September 2014)

The Path Not Taken

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), an extremist group with its roots in Iraq, exploited Syria's mounting chaos to establish itself in various pockets of ungoverned territory beginning in 2013. In January 2014, ISIL seized control of Raqqa, claiming it as the capital of its self-proclaimed caliphate. By June 2014, ISIL had swept across large portions of Iraq as well, seizing Mosul, Iraq's second largest city. ISIL beheaded journalist James Wright Foley in Syria in August 2014; Foley was the first American killed in the group's brutal campaign. Alarmed by ISIL's growing territorial control and its commission of brutal atrocities, the United States announced the formation of a broad international coalition to defeat ISIL. In September 2014, following the opening of the counter-ISIL campaign in Iraq, the coalition initiated airstrikes against ISIL targets in Syria.

In the late summer 2014, following ISIL's "blitzkrieg" across Iraq and parts of Syria, the Obama administration made a formal strategic shift prioritizing Iraq and the fight against ISIL over counter-regime objectives in Syria. The shift reflected the administration's clear priority to "go after ISIS and other terrorist groups plotting against the US."⁸⁴ It also signaled mounting unease with growing radicalization among Syrian armed opposition groups. This unease also dovetailed with heightened counterterrorism (CT) priorities in Syria. The decision was reflected in the US strategy to degrade and ultimately defeat ISIL, adopted in September 2014.

The policy was further elaborated in a series of National Security Council meetings chaired by the president during fall 2014. The strategy included three key components: ISIL first, Iraq first, and de-escalation in Syria, implicitly jettisoning the objective of a near-term political transition in Syria that would remove Assad. As a former midlevel government official explained, "What you do about Assad changes if you put ISIS first."⁸⁵

The strategy emerged from a discussion over several potential options: Option 1 focused on working with US partners in Iraq, including the central government, developing local partners on the ground in Syria, and more broadly focusing diplomacy to de-escalate the Syrian conflict. With fighting ISIL as the more urgent priority in Syria, policy discussions quickly turned to identifying potential US partners. "There was no real answer to Assad as part of the problem, but some felt if we could wind down the war itself, then Russia's interest in removing Assad might

⁸⁴ Author interview with former senior White House advisor, May 10, 2017.

⁸⁵ Author interview with former midlevel government official, April 11, 2017.

have grown. There was also discussion about implementing massive de-centralization as part of a de-escalation framework.”⁸⁶

By contrast, Option 2—the path not taken—was described as a “Sahwa (Sunni Awakening) Redux,” focused on leaning in with the Sunnis to overthrow Assad and work with a new government in Syria to counter ISIL. A critical underlying assumption of this option noted that to successfully address the root problem of Sunni disaffection and resentment, which gave rise to ISIL, it was critical to work with Gulf partners, overthrow Assad, and push back on Iran. In public statements, the United States repeatedly accused Assad as being a “magnet” for terrorism.

While frictions between counterterrorism and counter-Assad objectives had long been present in Syria policy discussions, ISIL’s emergence in Syria heightened these differences and favored the counterterrorism arguments. Given the clear priority and urgency of protecting the US homeland from terrorist attacks, the second option was rejected.

This critical policy juncture highlighted mounting tensions between the counterterrorism and counter-Assad priorities. “There were real tensions between our CT objectives and our ‘whither Syria’ objectives. We tried to have it both ways by papering over the differences.”⁸⁷ As the anti-Assad opposition grew increasingly radical, many within the administration raised the risk of “catastrophic success”—the fall of the regime, leaving a vacuum to be filled by extremist groups such as Nusra and ISIL.

With the counter-ISIL campaign the clear priority, policy options designed to pressure the Syrian regime now had to factor in the preeminence of the counter-ISIL objective. Proposed actions had to be evaluated on how they would impact counter-ISIL measures, and more resources were devoted to fighting ISIL than to other objectives.⁸⁸

The Counterfactual

Intensify anti-regime efforts, underscoring the regime as a key perpetrator of civilian casualties and therefore a root driver for the rise of ISIL. Although the focus of this critical juncture placed ISIL as the key priority, the underlying premise of this counterfactual emphasizes removing Assad as the key perpetrator of atrocities against the Sunni community and therefore the primary source of Sunni disaffection in Syria. A former senior government official noted, “The administration disaggregated counter-ISIL from counter-regime in a way that was not credible. Had the US wanted to, the decision to ramp up against ISIL could have been a

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Author interview with former senior White House official, April 10, 2017.

⁸⁸ Author interview with former senior White House official, May 10, 2017

premise to do more against the regime. We could have articulated and defended a more muscular approach against the regime as well.”⁸⁹

As some analysts note

When Western attention was subsequently directed to Syria, the debate focused on ISIS rather than on the fate of the regime or political transition. The ‘ISIS first’ approach to Syria and the expressed willingness of the international coalition to target the group there illustrated to the Syrian opposition that the West was ready to intervene directly to counter ISIS, but not to protect civilians in opposition-held areas from the regime’s barrel bomb attacks. This fostered a deep sense of betrayal among many within the Syrian opposition, as the ISIS-first approach communicated the prioritization of a military solution to one of the *products* of the conflict over the search for a peace settlement that would tackle its *drivers*.⁹⁰

While not explicitly related to this critical policy juncture, a 2016 State Department dissent cable⁹¹ signed by 51 State Department officials underscores, “The moral rationale for taking steps to end the deaths and suffering in Syria, after five years of brutal war, is evident and unquestionable.”⁹² The cable calls for “a judicious use of stand-off and air weapons” and noting that attacking the regime would engender greater support among Syria’s Sunni population, while undermining support for ISIL.

Conclusion: Implementing a more muscular anti-regime policy as part of a broader counter-ISIL strategy in Syria in 2014 is unlikely to have led to a better outcome with respect to civilian casualties and atrocities.

This counterfactual is not plausible given the Obama administration’s sense of urgency to counter ISIL, its focus on protecting the homeland, and its reluctance to engage in open-ended military intervention in Syria. Bolstering kinetic measures against the Assad regime to punish it for its indiscriminate bombing of civilians and other atrocities committed might have served to deter the regime from continuing such attacks. However, in this instance, unlike the September 2013 “red line” juncture, military intervention would not have been bounded by a specific

⁸⁹ Author interview with former senior government official, March 22, 2017.

⁹⁰ Khatib, et al., 27.

⁹¹ The 2016 cable reflected mounting frustrations with the Assad regime’s persistent violations of a cease-fire negotiated by the United States and Russia (part of the adopted de-escalation approach). The cable did not advocate for regime change, but rather the use of military pressure to enforce the cease-fire.

⁹² Mark Landler, “51 U.S. Diplomats Urge Strikes Against Assad,” the *New York Times*, June 16, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/17/world/middleeast/syria-assad-obama-airstrikes-diplomats-memo.html>.

episode, but rather would have been part of a broader, more aggressive engagement targeting the regime.

Moreover, as defined by the policy debate at this juncture, the proposed alternative envisioned dramatically increasing support to Sunni rebels with the intent of stabilizing territory, protecting civilians, and advancing prospects for a political solution. Given the fractiousness of the armed opposition at that point, regime change in Syria by 2014–2015 could have led to an even greater level of violence and killing as rival factions would compete for power. Moreover, the increased radicalization of armed groups by that time might have led to the “catastrophic success” scenario marked by the empowering of extremists who might have committed further atrocities.

The unintended consequences of this policy decision might have been significant, particularly with respect to the level of killing and the duration of the conflict. This type of intervention runs a much greater risk of escalation and a slide down the “slippery slope” of deepening US military involvement and intensification of conflict. This in turn might have led to greater killing. Intensifying military efforts against the regime likely would have been met with counter-escalation by the regime and its allies, as well as broader destabilization across the region.

Critical Juncture 5: The decision not to enforce a No-Fly Zone (NFZ) over all or parts of Syria (2012, 2013, and 2015)

The Lazarus Option

Calls to enforce a no-fly zone in Syria began relatively early in the crisis, with some advocating this option in the fall of 2011, six months into the crisis.⁹³ Arguments in favor of a no-fly zone often raised the precedent set in Libya.⁹⁴ The no-fly zone option often would surface in the public discourse on Syria during particularly egregious episodes of regime violence perpetrated against civilians. The interagency would consider the option whenever there was a downturn on the ground or there was pressure from the Hill or the State Department.⁹⁵ In both 2012 and 2013, violence against civilians intensified as the regime resorted to increasingly brutal and indiscriminate tactics. In addition, calls for a no-fly zone intensified when refugee flows mushroomed, as during the summer of 2015 when large numbers of Syrian refugees fled to Europe.

The option to enforce a no-fly zone over all or part of Syria has been raised multiple times throughout the conflict. While this option was considered several times, including in senior level Principals Committee meetings and with the President, it was dismissed lacking a strong core constituency among senior Cabinet officials. These deliberations fell short of a deeper exploration of more creative options that would have resulted in effect to at least a partial no-fly zone. The no-fly zone option was often considered in tandem with broader civilian protection measures such as safe zones or humanitarian corridors, which entailed greater commitment and risk due to the need for troops on the ground to protect such zones. The no-fly-zone option was first presented in July 2012 as Syria descended into all-out civil war following the collapse of the Geneva process.⁹⁶ A no-fly zone was also included in a July 2013 letter from then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Martin Dempsey to Senator Carl Levin. No-fly zones options were also considered in a National Security Council meeting with President Obama in late summer 2015, with mounting refugee flows to Europe.

While enforcing a no-fly zone undoubtedly constitutes a major undertaking with significant direct and opportunity costs, many former government officials familiar with the interagency deliberations on the option felt the Pentagon vastly exaggerated the costs in order to render the

⁹³ See, for example, Michael Weiss, “A No-Fly Zone May be the Only Way to Save Syria,” October 28, 2011. <http://henryjacksonsociety.org/2011/10/28/a-no-fly-zone-may-be-the-only-way-to-save-syria/>.

⁹⁴ The passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1973 (2011) led to the NATO/US-led establishment of a no-fly zone as part of a broader humanitarian protection mission.

⁹⁵ This point was made by various former government officials during author interviews.

⁹⁶ Adam Entous, “Inside Obama’s Syria Debate,” the *Wall Street Journal*, March 30, 2013.

option untenable. For example, in his letter to Levin, Dempsey asserts that establishing a no-fly zone over all of Syria “would require hundreds of ground- and sea-based aircraft, intelligence and electronic warfare support, and enablers for refueling and communications. Estimated costs are \$500 million initially, averaging as much as a billion dollars per month over the course of a year.”⁹⁷ Yet, “From DOD’s vantage point, it was doable, but we really didn’t want to do it. We could have worked it as we did with Northern Watch in Iraq, but that was a long term effort ... The military didn’t want to commit to another ten-year plan, and no one could tell us what comes next.”⁹⁸ In a post-Iraq and post-Afghanistan environment, the lack of clarity over a no-fly zone’s objectives and endgame significantly diminished support for such a measure at the Pentagon.

The military’s reluctance to enforce a no-fly zone dovetailed with Obama’s strong resistance to the measure. Informed in part by the negative experience with Libya’s no-fly zone as well as his abiding reticence over US military involvement in Syria, the president did not seem open to the option. A former senior White House advisor noted the “sense that POTUS was not going to go there. For Obama, an NFZ was met with ‘Let’s not kid ourselves. This is war against the regime.’ What’s the legal mandate? It’s not within the Authorization for the Use of Military Force, the UN, or self-defense.”⁹⁹

The White House lawyers also argued strongly against it, further reinforcing the president’s resistance to the option.¹⁰⁰ Russia’s September 2015 military intervention in Syria essentially foreclosed any further discussion of a no-fly zone. As one former senior White House advisor noted, “The risks of an NFZ changed substantially in the fall 2015, and it was no longer a real option.”¹⁰¹

The Counterfactual

Enforcing a no-fly zone over at least a portion of Syria by 2013. Proponents of some version of a no-fly zone emphasize the measure’s civilian protection focus. They argue that a no-fly zone could have diminished civilian casualties, particularly if enforced over densely populated urban areas where civilians were routinely killed by the regime’s use of indiscriminate barrel bombs. Many of those interviewed underscored that by framing the option in its most ambitious form, other, more creative options that could achieve the same effect, over at least a portion of Syria, were not sufficiently considered. “I still feel to this day that sufficient creativity was not applied to this option. There could have been a ‘threading the needle’ option to push in on the

⁹⁷ Letter from Dempsey to Levin, http://thehill.com/images/stories/news/2013/07_july/22/dempsey.pdf.

⁹⁸ Author interview with former senior government official, March 29, 2017.

⁹⁹ Author interview with former senior White House official, April 14, 2017.

¹⁰⁰ Author interview with former senior White House official, April 10, 2017.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

humanitarian front but we couldn't get past the legalities. The military also could have assumed more risk when they developed their option.”¹⁰²

In this view, other options that achieve the same objective should have been pursued more seriously. In particular, advocates of this counterfactual focus on the potential role of standoff weapons to achieve the same goal—a de facto zone where the Syrian air force would not be able to fly. Some suggested using the patriot missile batteries that were deployed in southern Turkey and warning the Syrians that any plane that flies within 75 miles of the Turkish border in Syria would be shot down. As a NATO ally, it is possible that such a zone might have been established under Article 5 of the NATO treaty asserting the principle of collective self-defense.

While there might have been more creative options to achieve a no-fly zone over part of Syria, this counterfactual still does not address the lack of a legal basis to establish such a zone, nor does it address the deeper issue of killing undertaken by land-based forces. As one former senior White House advisor noted, “It could have been done early on and had an impact. Assad would have used airpower less and the Russians would not have come in. But it is still quite likely there would have been a vicious civil war going on under the NFZ. So it's hard to see if it would have stopped the killing. It would have changed the killing. The regime would use artillery and could still undertake sieges.”¹⁰³

Conclusion: Enforcing a partial no-fly zone – perhaps in northern Syria using standoff weapons or employing different tools —should have been given greater consideration.

This counterfactual stresses the numerous hurdles—operational, legal, and policy among others—which impeded more extensive exploration of no-fly zone options. In addition, the interagency's lack of creativity on developing less ambitious iterations of a no-fly zone stands out as a critical failing. While it is not certain that a no-fly zone would have been a viable option to save civilian lives, various iterations of this option were not fully explored. For example, some variation of a limited no-fly zone relying on standoff weaponry rather than US aircraft could have at least been developed more seriously as an option. Alternatively, perhaps different tools or emerging technologies might have been leveraged to achieve the same effect. If feasible, it might have saved significant civilian lives without necessarily increasing the risk of large-scale escalation. Certainly, this counterfactual entails several unknowns. Nor is there any guarantee that killing by other means would not continue, even with a no-fly zone. Still, given the level of atrocities and killing perpetrated by the regime's use of indiscriminate aerial bombing of civilian targets, particularly in northern Syria, an option to neutralize the regime's airpower over at least a portion of Syria deserved greater consideration.

¹⁰² Author interview with former senior White House advisor, April 10, 2017.

¹⁰³ Author interview with former senior White House advisor, March 31, 2017

LATTER-DAY POLICY DILEMMAS¹⁰⁴

While Syria policy makers continued to deliberate on critical policy issues until the final days of the Obama administration, these decisions did not quite meet the threshold of critical junctures given the low probability of a major shift in US policy in the waning days of the administration. Moreover, the period from late 2015 through the end of the administration was marked by Russia's unexpected intervention in Syria in September 2015, further constraining the administration's ability to maneuver. The prospect of sparking "World War III" with the Russians only deepened existing apprehensions regarding US military intervention in Syria. Although the administration intensified its military engagement in Syria in the counter-ISIL campaign, it worked assiduously to de-conflict coalition military missions with the Russians' military engagement.

While not a "critical juncture" as defined by this paper, the final year of Obama administration Syria policy nonetheless merits brief discussion given the administration's focus on de-escalating violence and improving humanitarian access. Sensing an opportunity to exploit Russia's potential miring in the Syrian quagmire, the administration undertook a final effort to pursue a deal with Russia that would broker a nationwide cease-fire, open humanitarian access to besieged areas, establish cooperation with the Russians on pursuing ISIL and Nusra, and ultimately pave the way for a negotiated end to the conflict.

In February 2016, the administration spearheaded the successful negotiation with Russia of a "cessation of hostilities" (CoH). The International Syria Support Group (ISSG), which included both Russia and Iran, endorsed the agreement.¹⁰⁵ The ISSG, co-chaired by Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, "represented the most concerted diplomatic effort since May/June 2012 to try to de-escalate violence and save lives."¹⁰⁶

At a minimum, the CoH promised to constrain Russian airpower, which had injected a serious new element into the conflict. The CoH initially resulted in a dramatic downturn in violence across Syria and improved humanitarian access. However, within a few months, violence resurged as the regime unleashed increasingly brutal attacks in direct violation of the CoH. By summer 2016, the CoH existed in name only as the regime, backed by Russia, embarked on a

¹⁰⁴ This section was informed by discussions in a June 13, 2017, research workshop sponsored by the Simon-Skjoldt Center for the Prevention of Genocide at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Workshop participants offered feedback on this and other papers comprising a multi-method analysis of Syria policy.

¹⁰⁵ For a full text of the communique, see <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/12/syria-cessation-of-hostilities-full-text-of-the-support-groups-communique>.

¹⁰⁶ Author e-mail correspondence with former senior White House official, June 19, 2017.

brutal military campaign which ultimately led to its recapture of opposition-held parts of Aleppo, denoting a significant turn of the conflict in the regime's favor.

“With it increasingly clear that no political deal could be reached, the US and Russia explored, ultimately unsuccessfully, an arrangement to impose a voluntary no-fly zone by Russia and the regime, over densely populated areas, in exchange for US-Russian joint cooperation to target ISIL and Nusra.”¹⁰⁷ The United States negotiated an agreement with Russia in September 2016 that would have established a Joint Implementation Center (JIC) with the Russians to deepen coordination in the fight against extremist groups had the truce held for seven consecutive days.¹⁰⁸ The deal foundered in the following days as the regime and Russia continued their barrage of opposition-held Aleppo.¹⁰⁹

Russia and the regime intensified indiscriminate bombing of civilian targets, including medical facilities and a humanitarian convoy, marking a particularly egregious period of war crimes.¹¹⁰ The collapse of the CoH, evidenced by burgeoning violence in Syria, prompted some inside the administration to advocate for the use of military force to enforce the agreement.

The previously noted June 2016 dissent cable at the State Department voiced deep frustration with repeated regime violations of the cease-fire and underscored the need for effective enforcement of the cease-fire through military means. While some believed military pressure was needed to enforce the CoH and move toward a deal, others, most notably the president, felt US leverage with the Russians was sufficient to push for a deal and underscored the downside risk of an escalating confrontation with Russia in Syria.

In addition, the negotiations themselves took on a life of their own; the tantalizing prize of a deal on Syria with Russia obscured the downside of pursuing negotiations at any price. Ultimately, the negotiations failed as the regime consolidated control over Aleppo. Russia then seized the upper hand to initiate its own cease-fire process in Astana, Kazakhstan, in December 2016. Thus

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Karen DeYoung, “US, Russia Reach Deal in Cease-fire in Syria,” the *Washington Post*, September 9, 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/russian-foreign-minister-lavrov-says-he-was-thinking-of-calling-it-a-day-on-syria-talks-with-the-united-states/2016/09/09/f37ca320-75ff-11e6-9781-49e591781754_story.html.

¹⁰⁹ Michael R. Gordon, “Syria Talks Will End if Aleppo Bombing Continues, US Tells Russia,” the *New York Times*, September 28, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/29/world/middleeast/syria-john-kerry-aleppo-russia.html>.

¹¹⁰ For reporting on the bombing of the humanitarian convoy see Anne Barnard and Michael Gordon, “Aid Convoy Is Hit in Syria as Cease-fire Falts and Bombings Resume,” the *New York Times*, September 19, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/20/world/middleeast/syria-aid-john-kerry.html>. Two days prior to the attack, the United States mistakenly hit a column of more than 60 Syrian government soldiers, dramatically escalating tensions with Russia and the Syrian regime, which accused the United States of purposely undertaking the attack.

far, the Astana process has yielded little tangible impact on the ground as the killing in Syria continues.

CONCLUSIONS

No silver bullet. After reviewing the five critical policy junctures in the Syria conflict, no single shift in policy options would have definitively led to a better outcome. The first decision—Obama’s call for Assad to step aside—was the most consequential. Wittingly or not, it established an emphasis on regime change that placed the removal of Assad front and center, while foreclosing other, more nuanced options. The negative impact of this initial policy decision was compounded by the failure to adequately assess the regime’s durability or the support of its allies.

Committed to extricating the United States from two ongoing wars in the region, Obama was not willing to enter a third war in Syria. As such, a clear asymmetry of stakes shaped the policy landscape: Syria would never matter as much to the United States as it did to Russia and Iran. Both countries were willing to commit extensive resources and intervene directly to shore up the regime. The United States, by contrast, was not willing to do as much to unseat the regime. Moreover US fears of “catastrophic success”—the fall of the Assad regime and its replacement by Islamist extremists—were stoked by an increasingly radicalized armed opposition. Some portions of the US government voiced increasing discomfort over which groups merited US support and how much support to provide them.

Of the other critical policy junctures assessed, the “red line” incident in September 2013 held the greatest potential to shift the conflict’s trajectory by following the limited use of force with aggressive diplomacy. Yet, a positive outcome that led to the conflict’s end or a significant de-escalation was in no way assured. It would have required several key developments to fall into place: the appropriate calibration of the use of force, the shifting calculus of Iran and Russia, the regime’s key allies, and the successful transformation of those moves into a political settlement.

Focusing on Assad rather than the conflict. The net effect of this first key policy failing—calling for Assad to go in the absence of a well-conceived strategy to achieve that objective—led to a series of policy junctures that focused on the aggressor, Assad, rather than on the conflict itself. The policy options that were developed favored pressuring Assad over ending the conflict. A former senior White House advisor noted, “Saving lives should have been an imperative on its own ... The debate on the no-fly zone and the chemical weapons ‘red line’ does a grave injustice to the question of on what terms were we looking to end the conflict.”¹¹¹

Lowered expectations regarding the fate of the regime might have allowed for a broader array of policy options and more successful diplomacy earlier in the conflict, diminishing the killing by finding alternate paths toward ending the conflict. As one former senior White House official

¹¹¹ Author interview with former senior White House advisor, March 31, 2017.

asked, “At what point do we no longer insist on Assad going and instead look to de-escalation? People were afraid to even ask the question.”¹¹² Another former senior White House advisor underscored, “Fomenting a civil war for six years also has moral implications for civilian casualties. We thought keeping Assad would mean the war continues, but the real driver was the war itself, not Assad per se.”¹¹³ Another former senior White House official underscored, “It’s not clear what the Syrians want and *which* Syrians.” He asked rhetorically, “Would you be willing to live with a deal, to lower your expectations on what that deal should entail?”¹¹⁴

The asymmetry of stakes. The policy options chosen were designed to use incremental pressure to implement a strategy of “managed transition” by getting the regime to the negotiating table—in essence a euphemism for regime change since the stated intention was the regime’s transition out of power. For the Assad regime, hailing from a minority sect, the stakes were not merely losing power, but existential. In essence, “you either win or die.” These existential stakes prompted a “win at all costs” approach by the regime, including the commission of atrocities and other war crimes.

A former senior White House official explained that this “asymmetry of stakes” raised a significant question for the president: “How do you produce an existential decision by the regime to relinquish power with incremental pressure?”¹¹⁵ Instead, the options taken, in particular arming the rebels, led to a deepening cycle of escalation and counter-escalation, further entrenching the conflict amid increasing death tolls and atrocities. The regime and its allies responded to an incremental increase in pressure by ratcheting up their response, embroiling the conflict in a self-perpetuating vicious cycle.

Finding the sweet spot for the use of force. More emphasis should have been placed on developing creative and innovative uses of force both to undergird diplomatic initiatives and to deter the commission of atrocities by the regime. The role of force in the service of diplomacy needs to be more fully explored. As a former senior State Department official noted, elements within the US government “still do not understand how to use force and diplomacy together.”¹¹⁶ Specifically, more rigorous conceptual work must be done to develop options that more effectively marry the limited use of force and diplomacy.

More broadly, greater thought and the development of new approaches is critical to achieve the “holy grail” of the use of force for humanitarian ends: a measured, kinetic intervention that

¹¹² Author interview with former senior White House official, April 10, 2017.

¹¹³ Author interview with former senior White House advisor, March 31, 2017.

¹¹⁴ Author interview with former senior White House official, March 31, 2017.

¹¹⁵ Author interview with former senior White House official, April 14, 2017.

¹¹⁶ Author correspondence with former senior State Department official, May 15, 2017.

deters atrocities yet is not escalatory. The intervention must be resonant, sending a clear signal that shifts the parties' calculus away from conflict and toward diplomacy. The development of a so-called Goldilocks military option—not too little force and not too much—has been elusive. Clearly, more effort must be invested in this type of work.

Specifically, this type of limited military engagement should be framed as part of an evolving humanitarian intervention doctrine that focuses on surgical action to deter the worst kinds of behavior and pave the way for diplomacy. The development of such a doctrine would refine military options perhaps incorporating greater thinking on the use of stand-off weaponry or drones. More work also needs to be done in the legal realm, particularly with respect to developing a rationale for engagement when the UN Security Council is stymied. The enormous suffering in Syria underscores the urgency for undertaking the legal engineering necessary to develop new rules and a legal architecture for humanitarian intervention in the complex conflicts that have come to characterize the 21st century.

Improving flaws in the policy process. Beyond these substantive conclusions, important process-related conclusions also deserve mention. Several aspects of the Syria policy process revealed clear areas for improvement:

- **First, ensure more innovative options are floated and appropriately deliberated.** Encouraging the development of counter-intuitive and creative policy options early and often in the policy process is important. In at least two key instances: the president's initial statement on Assad and the development of no-fly zone options, creative, nuanced options might have made a difference, but were not sufficiently worked through the interagency policy process. In particular, the NSC's midlevel staff should spearhead efforts to develop more creative policy options through inclusive engagement of midlevel staff across relevant departments and agencies.
- **Second, scrub assumptions and regularly re-check underlying analysis.** Elevating regular "red team" analysis to be integrated into the policy process at the most senior levels is important. While the Intelligence Community regularly engages in such exercises, this work must be undertaken with regularity at the White House, with the support of the most senior policy makers from State and the Pentagon. Creative brainstorming that breaks down bureaucratic stovepipes is essential.
- **Third, focus on strategic, not tactical, decisions.** Syria decision making often fell hostage to endless deliberations that focused on tactical rather than strategic questions. The NSC in particular sank into a daily grind of operational decisions that inhibited deeper strategic insights or the ability to step back and appreciate the larger context of the Syria crisis. A former senior White House official lamented, "We met multiple times a

week on Syria,” with discussions often focused on the status of how the opposition was faring. They began to resemble “bad, scary episodes of Groundhog Day ... We lost our way and were trapped in a never-ending sea of tactical decisions. Instead of getting strategic and asking what do we really want and how do we stop the burning in Syria.”¹¹⁷

- **Finally, encourage healthy debate and exchange both within government and between government and outside experts.** The Syria debate often was stifled both inside and outside government by the tyranny of the crowd, particularly on the question of the conflict versus the Assad regime as the driver of the killing. As noted previously, a former senior White House official asked, “At what point do we no longer insist on Assad going and instead look to de-escalation? People were afraid to even ask the question.”¹¹⁸ Within the State Department, it was reportedly difficult to air opposing views on arming or at variance with the position that more robust US military engagement was needed. For its part, the think tank community at times functioned as an echo chamber focused on criticizing the administration for not providing enough support to the opposition, while not presenting more creative options for how to de-escalate the conflict. Many government policy makers did not feel well served on Syria by the think tank community. One former senior White House official felt the Syria expert community was more focused on how to assist the opposition, rather than how to end the conflict.¹¹⁹ Meanwhile, some in the think tank community felt the government did not do enough to regularly bring in counterintuitive views from the outside.

¹¹⁷ Author interview with former senior White House official, April 5, 2017.

¹¹⁸ Author interview with former senior White House official, April 10, 2017.

¹¹⁹ Author interview with former senior White House official, March 31, 2017.

List of Author Interviews

Former USG Officials

Salman Ahmed, former Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Strategic Planning, National Security Council and former Chief of Staff of the United States Mission to the United Nations and Senior Policy Advisor to the United States Permanent Representative to the United Nations

Wa'el Alzayat, former Senior Policy Advisor to United States Permanent Representative to the United Nations

Alexander Bick, former Director for Syria, National Security Council and former Member, Policy Planning Staff, United States Department of State

Courtney Brown, former USAID/OTI Syria Country Representative

Derek Chollet, former Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs

Ruth Citrin, former Director for Syria and Lebanon, National Security Council and former Advisor on Syria Policy with the Secretary of State's Policy Planning Staff

Melissa Dalton, former Country Director for Lebanon and Syria, Office of Undersecretary of Defense for Policy

Robert Ford, former United States Ambassador to Syria

Philip Gordon, former Special Assistant to the President and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa, and the Gulf Region, National Security Council

Fred Hof, former Special Adviser for Transition in Syria, United States Department of State

Bruce Jentleson, former Senior Advisor to the United States Department of State Policy Planning Director

Colin Kahl, former Deputy Assistant to the President and National Security Advisor to the Vice President and former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East

Jeremy Konyndyk, former Director of the Office of United States Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), USAID

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Lisa Roman, former Senior Policy Adviser and Director for Syria, National Security Council

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Steve Simon, former Senior Director for Middle Eastern and North African Affairs, National Security Council

Elissa Slotkin, former Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs

Julianne Smith, former Deputy National Security Advisor to the Vice President

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The Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide

of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum works to prevent genocide and related crimes against humanity. The Simon-Skjodt Center is dedicated to stimulating timely global action to prevent genocide and to catalyze an international response when it occurs. Our goal is to make the prevention of genocide a core foreign policy priority for leaders around the world through a multi-pronged program of research, education, and public outreach. We work to equip decision makers, starting with officials in the United States but also extending to other governments, with the knowledge, tools, and institutional support required to prevent—or, if necessary, halt—genocide and related crimes against humanity.

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