

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES FOR PREVENTION?

A Study of U.S. Policy and Atrocities in Syria since 2011

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This research effort was motivated by a basic question: What, if anything, could the US government plausibly have done that would have prevented or mitigated atrocities against civilians in Syria since 2011?

There has been no shortage of public criticism of US policy on Syria—in particular, of the failure to prevent the large-scale killing of civilians. In a representative critique, Michael Ignatieff and Leon Wieseltier argued in 2016 that US policy on Syria was “shameful,” and added, “The conventional wisdom is that nothing can be done in Syria, but the conventional wisdom is wrong.”¹ On the other side of the debate, despite saying in late 2016 that Syria “haunts me constantly,” then-President Barack Obama stated flatly, “The conventional arguments about what could have been done are wrong.”²

This study was designed to address the sharply divergent assessments of US Syria policy through a systematic, multimethod research effort. It sought to identify when there were significant opportunities for different US government actions, what alternative actions were plausible options, and which, if any of them would have been likely to produce better results for Syria’s civilians. The aims were to deepen understanding about how the US government responds to mass atrocity crises and help policymakers choose effective actions in response to atrocities in Syria and elsewhere.

Building this understanding requires assessing claims about what did not happen—i.e., counterfactuals—which is inherently difficult. Nevertheless, a careful multimethod approach can shed light on key decisions, explicate critical assumptions associated with counterfactual claims, and narrow the range of uncertainty.

Research Strategy

Three methodological strategies distinguish this study:

1. *We started by identifying “critical junctures” in US Syria policy and the most prominent counterfactual options that were considered at these junctures:* To zero in on the most plausible counterfactual actions across a six-year

period, we identified the relatively short periods when US policy was more open to significant change—i.e., “critical junctures.”³ For each of these critical junctures, we sought to describe the actions that the US government seriously considered, but did not take. Evidence that one or more of these counterfactual actions would have likely resulted in fewer atrocities would indicate some combination of: (a) misjudgment in choosing between options; or (b) lack of priority on preventing atrocities relative to other US interests.

We also sought to identify other counterfactual actions, which might not have been considered as seriously, but were still prominent in the debate about US Syria policy. Evidence that one or more of these counterfactual actions would have likely resulted in fewer atrocities would indicate deficiencies in the process of developing and presenting options to senior decision makers (though it would not rule out misjudgment or lack of priority on preventing atrocities).

2. *We applied explicit criteria for assessing the strength of counterfactual claims:* To guard against common pitfalls of counterfactual analysis, we used the framework described by political scientist Jack Levy to assess counterfactual arguments, which he summarizes as follows:

The best counterfactuals begin with clearly specified plausible worlds involving small and easily imaginable changes from the real world. They make relatively short-term predictions based on empirically validated theoretical generalizations and on secondary counterfactuals that are mutually consistent. These counterfactuals are also sensitive to strategic behavior that might return history to its original course, and they are explicitly tested against competing counterfactuals.⁴

3. *We employed a diverse set of methods with complementary strengths to assess the likely consequences of counterfactual actions:* The selected methods were: (1) in-depth interviews with experts and former officials, conducted by Mona Yacoubian; (2) game theoretic modeling, conducted by Andrew Kydd; (3)

agent-based (computational) modeling, conducted by Ian Lustick et al.; (4) systematic application of scholarship from other cases, conducted by Daniel Solomon; and (5) a structured survey of experts, conducted by Lawrence Woocher. To the extent that these independent and distinct methodologies generate similar results, it lends stronger support for any given finding; to the extent that they diverge, it indicates greater uncertainty surrounding the outcomes of counterfactual policy actions.⁵

Summary of Key Findings

Table 1 summarizes the findings across the different methods on five prominent counterfactual actions.⁶

The central finding is that none of the prominent counterfactual options found strong support across all of the research methods. In other words, we do not find support for the strong critique that claims that senior US government leaders rejected options that were realistic *and* clearly more effective in mitigating atrocities.

The only scenario that would not have featured mass atrocities, according to the computational modeling, was one in which Assad responded to protests in 2011 peacefully and a democratic reform process took hold (“democratizing bubble”)—a scenario that requires some heroic assumptions. The study does judge some counterfactual policy actions more positively than others. Yet even those for which there was relatively more support, we cannot say with high confidence that they would have resulted in a reduction in atrocities as compared with the actual policy.

The most interesting result may be on the first counterfactual—i.e., had Obama not called publicly for Assad to “step aside” in August 2011. Though this decision has attracted much less debate than choices around arming rebels and using direct force, interviews with former officials indicated this was the “most consequential” critical juncture because it framed US policy for years to come, complicating international negotiations seeking to end the conflict. To the extent that Obama’s statement contributed to Assad’s perception of “existential threat,” the argument for making a different kind of statement would match prevailing theory about the causes of mass atrocities. By contrast, this was the lowest-rated counterfactual according to the expert survey: half of respondents said there was less than a 15 percent chance that civilian fatalities over the subsequent year would have been lower had Obama not called on Assad to “step aside.” One interpretation of this apparent discrepancy is that while the statement was probably unwise because of its discernible negative effects, any plausible alternative would still have had a small chance of resulting in measurable improvements for Syrian civilians.

The greatest degree of consensus across the methods was on the 2012 proposal to arm and train elements of the rebellion,

known as the Clinton-Petraeus plan. Across the methods, the results were negative: They strongly suggest that a decision in mid-2012 to arm and train rebels would not have reduced atrocities against civilians and may well have increased them.

On the most hotly debated choice—the decision not to use force in response to the “redline” episode—this study found more support for the counterfactual argument, though evidence was mixed. According to the game theoretic analysis, retaliatory strikes could have deterred future atrocities by imposing costs on particularly egregious behavior. Based on her interviews, Yacoubian concluded that limited strikes followed by intensive diplomacy might have led to reductions in atrocities. Expert survey respondents rated this counterfactual action more positively than others, but still fewer than half of respondents said that limited strikes would have been more likely than not to reduce atrocities in the subsequent year. The computational modeling and review of evidence from other cases were more pessimistic about the impact of limited strikes in 2013, notably raising the prospect that strikes might have actually increased atrocities in the near-term.

Conclusions and Implications

Complexity, fallibility, and uncertainty: Three closely related themes emerged quite strongly from this study: the complexity of the Syrian conflict, the fallibility of analysis of critical aspects of the situation, and the high degree of uncertainty regarding impact of any US action.

The large number of influential actors, multiple distinct-but-related conflicts, and the constantly shifting context make Syria a particularly complex conflict.⁷ During the period these studies examine, these characteristics put a large premium on anticipating and trying to counteract other players’ responses to any US action, to plan for second- and third-order effects, and to adjust quickly in response to unanticipated shifts. Multiple threads of this study highlighted the complex dynamics: e.g., Kydd’s game theory model’s finding of multiple effects frequently working in opposite directions, Lustick et al.’s finding that outcomes were highly sensitive to random perturbations and that short term effects tended to fade away over time, and across the entire study, the enormous role that the reactions of Iran, Russia, and Gulf states played in mediating effects of US actions.

In such a highly complex context, it is especially important to recognize the fallibility of analytic judgments, both because complexity makes assessing the dynamics harder and because seemingly small mistakes can have outsized consequences. This comes through most clearly in Yacoubian’s discussion of how misjudgments—about the durability of the Assad regime, the level of commitment of its external backers, and the US capacity to contain the conflict—shaped the consideration of policy options in negative ways. On critical points such as these, US officials should have considered the policy

Table 1: Summary of key findings: Effects of prominent counterfactual US government actions on severity of atrocities in Syria

	<i>Counterfactual US government action</i>				
<i>Method</i>	No call for Assad to “step aside”	Arm and train moderate rebels	Airstrikes to enforce “redline”	“Assad first”	No-fly zone
In-depth interviews	A more nuanced statement could have mitigated subsequent atrocities	The plan might have prolonged the conflict	Strikes followed by intensive diplomacy might have mitigated subsequent atrocities	A more muscular anti-regime policy would not have led to a better outcome	Enforcing a partial no-fly zone should have been given greater consideration
Game theory	N/A	The plan might have prolonged the conflict, with uncertain effects on the severity of atrocities	Strikes would have increased the costs of new government atrocities	N/A	A no-fly zone could have made atrocities committed with air forces prohibitively costly
Agent-based modeling	“Democratizing bubble” scenario resulted in dramatic drop in civilian casualties	Increased atrocities in one model; no significant difference in the other	A sharp spike in atrocities, followed by a decline in atrocities over time, but on average not falling below the baseline condition	N/A	N/A
Expert survey	On average, respondents expected a less than one-in-four chance of lower civilian fatalities	On average, respondents expected a less than one-in-three chance of lower civilian fatalities; nearly half cited potential for increase in atrocities	On average, respondents expected a less than one-in-two chance of lower civilian fatalities	On average, respondents expected a less than one-in-three chance of lower civilian fatalities; 30 percent cited potential for increase in atrocities	Third most commonly cited action as potentially more effective in reducing civilian fatalities
Review of scholarship from other cases	N/A	The plan might have prolonged the conflict, which in turn might have increased the level of atrocities	Military intervention is associated with longer conflicts, a decreased likelihood of negotiated settlement, and a short-term increase in atrocities	N/A	Military intervention is associated with longer conflicts, a decreased likelihood of negotiated settlement, and a short-term increase in atrocities

Note: The cells are color coded based on each paper’s characterization of whether the analysis lent support for the effectiveness of the counterfactual policy action (green), found it would have been counterproductive (red), would have had no effect (yellow), or did not characterize their analysis in these terms (uncolored cells). The differences in the methods—especially in the way they describe probabilistic outcomes—makes precise comparison of findings on particular counterfactuals across methods virtually impossible.

implications had their best assessments turned out to be wrong.

Beyond certain consequential analytical misjudgments, high levels of uncertainty around critical policy questions plagued US Syria policy. The outcomes of any particular US government option were contingent on a host of factors that could at best be roughly estimated. The empirical evidence from other cases was minimal on some key questions, such as the impact of the US call for Assad to step aside, and a poor match to the actual policy dilemmas in Syria on other questions, such as the relationship between the timing of US interventions and likely effects on civilian fatalities. The extreme variation across expert survey respondents about the impact of prominent counterfactual actions, even years in retrospect, is striking, suggesting that decision makers in the moment were faced with deep uncertainty about the consequences of competing options.

Difficulty of the Syrian case: Though it is often stated that mass atrocities are preventable, the Syrian case demonstrates painfully that some episodes of mass atrocities are more difficult to prevent than others. This study suggests that a variety of factors, which were more or less fixed, made it very difficult from the beginning for the US government to take effective action to prevent or mitigate atrocities in Syria, even compared with other challenging policy contexts.

The component studies each found that all plausible counterfactual actions were at best highly chancy when it came to reducing civilian fatalities. “Prospects for avoiding catastrophe for large numbers of Syrians were not high,” summarized Lustick et al. (38). Yacoubian found similarly there was “no ‘silver bullet’ ... [that] would have definitively led to a better outcome” (ii). Kydd concluded that “the US faced a very tight set of constraints” (26). The expert survey found, on average, that every prominent counterfactual action would have had worse-than-even odds at reducing civilian fatalities. Solomon’s review found the empirical literature is largely pessimistic about the likelihood that external actions would reduce atrocities in a case like Syria.

Furthermore, the most common explanations of past US government failures to prevent mass atrocities provide little purchase on the Syrian case. The Syrian crisis certainly did not suffer for high-level attention within the US government. We did find strong evidence that other US interests—e.g., eliminating chemical weapons stockpiles, defeating ISIS—had more influence on US policy than the interest in protecting Syrian civilians. Yet, attributing failures to lack of priority requires identifying a course of action at a particular juncture in the Syrian conflict that would have been effective, but which was rejected or never seriously considered for reasons related to competing US interests. The decision not to undertake limited strikes after the chemical weapons attack in 2013 comes closest to meeting this test, but even there the

evidence is mixed as to the likely impact.

The difficulty of the Syrian case was compounded by the apparent lack of appreciation early in the conflict for these challenges to effective US action. Had the difficulty of the case and limits of US influence been more clearly and widely accepted, it should have affected the deliberations about the articulation of US objectives and strategy. An important lesson then is about the need for honest assessment of the scope and limits of US interest and influence in a given case and the need for this assessment to inform US strategy.

Problems with half measures: Obama’s 2011 presidential directive on mass atrocities echoed a prominent theme among atrocity prevention advocates in its statement, “In the face of a potential mass atrocity, our options are never limited to either sending in the military or standing by and doing nothing.” Some of these intermediate options were adopted in the Syrian case, while others were seriously considered but rejected. This study suggests, however, that in a difficult case like Syria, once atrocities have begun such intermediate measures are unlikely to be effective and might be prone to unintended negative consequences.

Seemingly lower-cost efforts to shape the conflict in Syria tended to contribute to escalation and prolongation of the fighting in ways that are fairly clear in retrospect. Each component study found evidence that support to one side in Syria’s civil war, whether via arming rebels or direct military action, short of what would produce victory, was likely to perpetuate the conflict. More generally, Yacoubian cited a fundamental “asymmetry of stakes” not only between the United States and Assad, but between the United States and Russia and Iran, calling into question the ability of the United States to achieve its objectives using any means that were considered to be of acceptable cost.

These findings underscore that it is the very early phase of a conflict, before key players have concluded that an internal challenge constitutes an “existential” threat, in which the intermediate range of policy measures is much more likely to prove its utility. In Syria, tragically, it seems that this period was vanishingly short or nonexistent.

Notes

¹ Michael Ignatieff and Leon Wieseltier, “Enough is enough—U.S. abdication on Syria must come to an end,” *Washington Post*, February 9, 2016.

² Doris Kearns Goodwin, “Barack Obama and Doris Kearns Goodwin: The Ultimate Exit Interview,” *Vanity Fair*, November 2016.

³ For a working definition of critical junctures, see Giovanni Capoccia and R. Daniel Keleman, “The Study of Critical Junctures: Theory, Narrative, and Counterfactuals in Historical Institutionalism,” *World Politics* 59, no. 3 (2007): 348: “relatively short periods of time during which there is a substantially heightened probability that agents’ choices will affect the outcome of interest.”

⁴ Jack S. Levy, “Counterfactuals, Causal Inference, and Historical Analysis,” *Security Studies* 24, no. 3 (2015): 378.

⁵ Philip Tetlock and Aaron Belkin, eds., *Counterfactual Thought Experiments in World Politics: Logical, Methodological, and Psychological Perspectives* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁶ Note that we did not analyze every prominent counterfactual option with each method.

⁷ Robert Ricigliano and Karen Grattan, “Advice to Policy Makers Who Would Tackle Syria: The Problem with Problem Solving,” *PRISM: A Journal of the Center for Complex Operations* 4 (2014): 118–31.

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