

The Goals and Interests of American Foreign Policy in the Syrian Civil War

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Abstract

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This paper reviews and analyzes the foreign policy decisions taken in Washington, regarding the Syrian civil war. A concerted effort is made to understand the thinking behind the decisions made pertaining to Syria, from the first signs of protests and war in 2010 until today. Official U.S. governmental documents as well as editorials and expert analysis will be taken into consideration when attempting to discern the motivations and thought processes behind American policy in Syria. The research points to evidence that would lead one to believe that the Obama administration has maintained an opposing stance to that of the Central Intelligence Agency. These tensions also provide an explanation for the Obama administration's seemingly wavering stance on its dealings with the Syrian regime and the rebel groups; depending on the amount of pressure the White House felt from the military, various governmental departments and allies.

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Introduction

The Syrian Civil War, starting in 2011, has been a humanitarian and political catastrophe, with hundreds of thousands killed, millions of people displaced, and a conflictual spillover into neighboring nations. Even before the war began, Syrian-American relations under the presidency of George H.W. Bush led to residual policies and perspectives that have continued under the presidency of Barack Obama. The civil war has also quickly devolved into a multi-layered proxy war, with many moving parts and with repercussions that affect much more than just the nation of Syria. They affect the geopolitical standings of many global powers, as well as hegemonic ambitions and economic power.

American policy in Syria throughout the duration of the civil war has been inconsistent and unpredictable. A microcosm of this assessment is when President Obama declared to the world that the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian president Bashar Al-Assad would be a “red line” that would force America to use military intervention. After reports of a chemical attack came out, Obama backtracked and did not act on his threat of crossing a “red line”. In addition, the United States was adamant that Assad had lost legitimacy and had to step down at the beginning of the war. Today, both President Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry are more willing to negotiate with Assad and to include him in future transitions. What caused this about-face? What were the thought processes at the start of the war? What led to a change in calculation? What is the thinking behind the actions being taken now?

The United States first began by aggressively arming rebels that were fighting the Syrian regime. As the war continued and the humanitarian crisis became worse, the United States began scaling back its support of many rebel groups, and became more open to the possibility of the

Syrian regime remaining in power. Why did the United States early on arm Islamist rebel groups and push for regime change? Why are they not doing so as vigorously today? This change is due to ideological tensions between and within different branches of government; specifically, the executive branch.

Thesis

The United States began a campaign of regime change in Syria under pressure from the status quo, the Washington “playbook” as Obama calls it, and from the agendas of other governmental agencies, such as the Central Intelligence Agency. This push for regime change was done under the guise of democracy promotion for the Syrian people and on a human rights basis wherein Assad had lost legitimacy by killing his own citizens. Today, these ambitions have mostly been scrapped due to the Obama administration being at odds with the CIA over how to proceed in Syria. This tension, within the executive branch over what actions to take in Syria, is due to a larger disagreement between various perspectives on how the world works. President Obama subscribes to more of a liberal worldview, whereas the CIA sees the world through an ideology similar to realism. Each worldview implies very different steps of actions that need to be taken to deal with an issue such as the Syrian civil war.

Background / Broader Context

This first background section will begin with US-Syrian relations beginning under the George H.W. Bush administration and the ebbs and flows this relationship has experienced until today. It will then delve into the main series of events in the Syrian civil war, from the start of major protests against the Assad regime until today. The next section will cover the theoretical and conceptual perspectives used to view the Syrian war and, by extension, the actions needed to

deal with the war. These main perspectives are realism and liberalism. The following section will discuss the methodology used in defining actions by various parties as being rooted in either conceptual perspective. The next section will cover the main body of the paper; pointing to actions taken by the Obama administration, and by the CIA, with an emphasis on examples where their actions match and where there is clearly a tension, or a disagreement. The Syrian civil war will be used as a case study through which the actions of the different parties will be examined. The following section will consist of the main findings. Here, the actions of the Obama administration in the Syrian civil war will be best matched to one of the perspectives; either realism or liberalism. The same will be done with the actions of the CIA in the war. Next, policy recommendations will be presented based on the agreement or disagreement of the administration and the CIA in Syria. Finally, the conclusion will tie up all remaining loose strings.

History of Pre-War Syria & Relations with USA

Syrian and American relations have been consistently cold over the decades, notwithstanding several anomalies in which relations have been friendly. During the Gulf War and the Lebanese civil war, the United States and Syria worked together to end both wars. A 1991 article from *The Chicago Tribune* analyzes the relationship at the time between Bashar Al-Assad's father, Hafez Assad, and George H.W. Bush. "The Bush administration credits Syria with helping to restrain terrorist groups that might have targeted U.S. and other Western interests during the war with Iraq" (Chicago Tribune, 1991). The article goes on to further explain the working relationship between the two presidents, as well as the American public's response to this thaw in relations. These dynamics in the early 1990s mirror today's dynamics. "The U.S. and Syria have consulted closely on implementation of a 1989 agreement among Arab states

aimed at ending the Lebanese civil war and restoring normality there... The U.S.-Syrian rapprochement is controversial in the U.S. Many Americans remember Assad as the ‘butcher of Hama’, the leader who laid siege to the city of Hama in 1982 and killed at least 10,000 residents in his bid to wipe out the Muslim Brotherhood that opposed him” (Chicago Tribune, 1991). Hafez Assad’s commitment to helping the US politically, as well as his strong arm in crushing dissent are traits that are manifesting themselves in his son, Bashar, today.

In the aftermath of the attacks in New York City on September 11, 2001, Syria worked with the US on the War on Terror. This cooperation was usually in terms of helping the CIA interrogate terrorists and other people for information on groups such as Al-Qaeda. According to a report released by the Open Society Justice Initiative (OSJI) in 2013, Syria, among other nations, has been a place where the CIA has tortured and interrogated suspected terrorists in cooperation with Bashar Al-Assad. “Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) commenced a secret detention program under which suspected terrorists were held in CIA prisons, also known as ‘black sites’, outside the United States, where they were subjected to ‘enhanced interrogation techniques’ that involved torture and other abuse” (OSJI 2013, 5). One of the suspected terrorists who was detained by US authorities in New York was “flown by the CIA to a detention center in Amman, Jordan, where he was blindfolded and beaten by Jordanian guards. Later the next day, he was driven to Syria, where he was imprisoned in the Far Falestin detention center, also called the Palestine Branch, which was run by the Syrian Military Intelligence (SMI). He was detained for more than ten months in a tiny grave-like cell seven feet high, six feet long, and three feet wide, beaten with cables, and threatened with electric shocks, among other forms of torture” (OSJI 2013, 32). This example of extraordinary rendition by the CIA to Syria is but one of several examples of this

working relationship in an attempt to deter terrorism. “Syria detained, interrogated, and tortured extraordinarily rendered individuals. It was one of the ‘most common destinations for rendered suspects’” (OSJI 2013, 111).

This warm relationship between Syria and the United States was more between the Syrian government and the CIA than between Syria and other agencies of the executive branch. According to an article published in 2003 in *The New Yorker*, an attack in Syria gone awry “had been based on ‘fragmentary and ambiguous’ information and had led to increased tension between [Secretary of Defense] Rumsfeld and the C.I.A. director, George Tenet” (The New Yorker, 2003). Furthermore, Hersh states that “Tenet’s involvement was significant. American intelligence and State Department officials have told me that by early 2002 Syria had emerged as one of the C.I.A.’s most effective intelligence allies in the fight against Al Qaeda, providing an outpouring of information that came to an end only with the invasion of Iraq” (The New Yorker, 2003). The Syrian government also alerted America of an al-Qaeda plan to fly a hang glider packed with explosives onto the Navy’s Fifth Fleet in Bahrain. “In one instance, the Syrians learned that Al Qaeda had penetrated the security services of Bahrain and had arranged for a glider loaded with explosives to be flown into a building at the U.S. Navy’s 5th Fleet headquarters there” (The New Yorker, 2003).

The tension between the CIA and other agencies such as the State Department began before the American invasion of Iraq in 2003; around the same time when American-Syrian relations went south. Even though Syria was offering the CIA information on Al Qaeda, the State Department believed that Syrian support for Hezbollah was something they could not tolerate, regardless of the information-sharing regarding Al Qaeda. “... the Syrians wanted a back channel to Washington – that is, a private means of communicating directly with the President and his

key aides. But there was a major obstacle: Syria's support for Hezbollah. 'Hezbollah may be the A team of terrorists and maybe Al Qaeda is actually the B team,' Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage said in a speech last September" (The New Yorker, 2003). The CIA welcomed a back channel with Syria as long as they continued to receive information about Al Qaeda. However, the State Department and the Pentagon were not having it. "A former State Department official told me that the C.I.A., ecstatic about the high level of cooperation with Syrian intelligence, 'didn't want to destroy the 'happy talk' about Al Qaeda by dealing with all the other troubling issues in the back channel'. The State Department, he added, did not like the Agency's having access to U.S.-Syrian diplomatic correspondence. And the Pentagon, preoccupied with the Iraq war and ideologically hostile to Syria, vehemently opposed a back channel" (The New Yorker, 2003).

While signs of tension began showing between the CIA and the rest of the foreign-policy world within the executive branch, relations began permanently deteriorating when Syria opposed the Bush administration's war in Iraq. "In midwinter, despite intense American pressure, Bashar Assad decided that Syria would not support the invasion of Iraq. Cooperation on Al Qaeda was now a secondary issue... Assad said that his opposition to the war was based on principle. 'Could the Iraqi people ignore an American occupation because they hated Saddam? The United States doesn't understand the society – not even the simplest analysis'" (The New Yorker, 2003). Assad's decision to not support the war in Iraq was also because of the flow of smuggled arms that was moving from his Baathist peers into Iraq. The US demanded that Assad cut off the flow, and he did not. As a result, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld "said that Syria would be held accountable for its actions. He accused Syria of supplying Iraq with night-vision goggles and other military goods... The Syrians were rattled by the threats, in part

because many in and close to the Bush Administration have been urging regime change in Damascus for years. In 2000, the Middle East Forum, a conservative Washington think tank, issued a study offering many of the same reasons for taking military action against Syria that were later invoked against Iraq” (The New Yorker, 2003). This attitude towards Syria was the beginning of a complicated and disconnected relationship with a nation that is today embroiled in a bloody and nasty civil war.

Relations completely diminished after the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in Lebanon. In February 2005, the US recalled its ambassador to Syria back to Washington. In a statement released by the State Department in 2005 regarding the recall of the ambassador, the spokesman proclaims that, “in recent months, we have raised repeatedly with senior officials of the Syrian Government a number of issues, including the Syrian presence in Lebanon, the continued presence and operational activities of international terrorist groups and the Iranian regime on and through Syrian territory, and the use of Syrian territory by the Iraqi insurgency” (State Department, 2005). A *New York Times* article from 2005 goes into further depth about the reasons for, and implications of, America withdrawing its ambassador to Damascus, and the almost-total deterioration of American-Syrian relations.

In recent weeks, the United States has been increasing pressure on Syria, focusing on Syria’s troop presence in Lebanon and its suspected support of the Iraq insurgency and of anti-Israel violence. Ms. Rice acknowledged that the recall of Ambassador Margaret Scobey was prompted by more than Mr. Hariri’s death... For a time last year, some American officials had argued that cooperation of the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, on some issues should be rewarded, citing Syria’s limited help in shutting down Syrian bases used by insurgents fighting in Iraq, and curbing the flow of money across the border that is suspected of aiding the insurgents. But in recent weeks, the United States changed its approach, in part influenced by mounting concerns in Israel over Syria’s alleged help to Hezbollah and other militant organizations accused of supporting attacks on Israelis. In going after Syria, the Bush administration also appeared to be sending a tough message to Syria’s ally, Iran, which Washington says is supplying the financing for the attacks on Israelis (The New York Times, 2005).

These intertwined and complex dynamics between Hezbollah, Iran, and Syria continue today and contribute to much of the decision-making done by the Obama administration, the CIA, and other agencies.

Relations continued to sour when the American embassy in Damascus was attacked by armed men in 2006. Although Syria successfully countered the attack and killed all of the assailants, Bashar Al-Assad blamed US foreign policy in the region as contributing to the incident.

The Syrian Embassy in Washington issued a statement saying: ‘in accordance with the Geneva Convention, Syria performed its duties in the best possible manner to protect the U.S. Embassy... Syrian security forces took the full brunt of the attack.’ The statement added: ‘It is regrettable that U.S. policies in the Middle East have fueled extremism, terrorism and anti-U.S. sentiment... The U.S. should take this opportunity to review its policies in the Middle East and start looking at the root causes of terrorism and broker a comprehensive peace in the Middle East’ (The Washington Post, 2006).

These comments by Assad were one of the first visible, and public, cracks in a relationship which would contribute to the rift that is now manifesting itself within American foreign-policy circles with regards to Syria.

However, with a new administration came new hopes for normalizing relations with Syria. President Obama began a policy of rapprochement with Syria shortly after taking office, by lifting the travel advisory for American citizens traveling to Syria and by appointing the first US ambassador to Syria since 2005. According to a *BBC* report from 2010:

US President Barack Obama has formally nominated career diplomat Robert Ford as the first American ambassador to Syria in five years... Syrian-American relations have been troubled over the last five years, but bridges are slowly being built, the BBC’s Lina Sinjab reports from Damascus. In 2005, the US withdrew its ambassador following the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Damascus was blamed for the killing, an accusation that Syria has always denied. Our correspondent says relations were strained even before Mr. Hariri’s assassination. In 2004, the US Congress passed the Syria Accountability Act – which prohibits American goods from being sold to Syria – and imposed financial sanctions” (BBC News, 2010).

After the appointment of ambassador Robert Ford, the Obama administration continued its efforts to improve relations with Syria. “Under Obama, the United States started talking to Syria’s government, in contrast to a policy of isolation under former President George W. Bush... Diplomats say Washington is hoping to pull Syria away from Iran and get its help in stabilizing neighboring Iraq... Washington has muted its criticism of Syria’s authoritarian system and the nomination of Robert Ford as ambassador to Damascus was seen as a major step in improving ties” (Reuters, 2010). Under President Obama, the US began a path of normalizing relations with Syria in an attempt at cooperation to pursue mutual interests.

However, at the same time Obama was attempting to strengthen ties between the two countries, diplomatic cables between the US embassy in Damascus and the State Department that were released by WikiLeaks in 2011 show that the US gave financial support to political opposition groups in Syria. “The U.S. money for Syrian opposition figures began flowing under President George W. Bush after he effectively froze political ties with Damascus in 2005. The financial backing has continued under President Obama, even as his administration sought to rebuild relations with Assad” (The Washington Post, 2011). These cables were sent from Damascus to Washington because the embassy staff had allegedly become worried that Syrian intelligence agents were investigating these programs. “The cables, provided by the anti-secrecy Web site WikiLeaks, show that U.S. Embassy officials in Damascus became worried in 2009 when they learned that Syrian intelligence agents were raising questions about U.S. programs. Some embassy officials suggested that the State Department reconsider its involvement, arguing that it could put the Obama administration’s rapprochement with Damascus at risk” (The Washington Post, 2011). They specifically include a payment of \$6 million to Barada satellite TV, which broadcast anti-government programming into Syria. “The London-based satellite

channel, Barada TV, began broadcasting in April 2009 but has ramped up operations to cover the mass protests in Syria as part of a long-standing campaign to overthrow the country's autocratic leader, Bashar al-Assad... Barada TV is closely affiliated with the Movement for Justice and Development, a London-based network of Syrian exiles. Classified U.S. diplomatic cables show that the State Department has funneled as much as \$6 million to the group since 2006 to operate the satellite channel and finance other activities inside Syria" (The Washington Post, 2011). This was the beginning of continued efforts of support to the Syrian opposition by some parties in the US foreign-policy conglomerate.

In the early weeks of the civil war, the United States did not initially respond to alleged abuses of protestors by Assad. In fact, then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called Assad a 'reformer' in March 2011 and said the US believed he would respond appropriately to the demands of his people (CNSNews.com, 2011).

Doing the round of Sunday television talk shows with Defense Secretary Robert Gates, Clinton told CBS' Face the Nation that the U.S. would not enter the conflict in Syria as it has in Libya. 'No,' she said. 'Each of these situations is unique'.... CBS newsman Bob Schieffer, the interviewer, noted that the president's father, Hafez Assad, had 'killed 25,000 people at a lick' – a reference to the crushing of an Islamist revolt in the town of Hama in 1982 – and said the regime now was firing at civilians with live ammunition. 'Why is that different from Libya?' he asked. 'There's a different leader in Syria now,' Clinton said. 'Many of the members of Congress of both parties who have gone to Syria in recent months have said they believe he's a reformer' (CNSNews.com, 2011).

Clinton's statement that many members of Congress believed Assad to be a reformer in 2011 points to the beginning signs of tension amid uncertainty over how to deal with Syria. That uncertainty extends to today.

However, as the war continued to become more brutal, Obama began stating that Assad had lost legitimacy and should step down. "'The future of Syria must be determined by its own people, but President Bashar al-Assad is standing in their way,' Obama said in a statement this

morning. ‘His calls for dialogue and reform have rung hollow while he is imprisoning, torturing and slaughtering his own people. We have consistently said that President Assad must lead a democratic transition or get out of the way. He has not led. For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside’” (Huffington Post, 2011). Hillary Clinton’s description of Assad as a reformer, as well as Obama’s reluctance to call for his removal for months on end, finally came to a turning point at the beginning of August, 2011. According to a White House official, “I think at the beginning of Ramadan [on August 1] we saw an uptick in violence and horrific brutality that made it perfectly clear that President Assad had no credibility, that everything he said about making reports and pulling back forces was a lie and had no credibility and we had lost patience with him” (Huffington Post, 2011). In conjunction with the administration’s first calls for Assad to step down, they also “imposed strict new sanctions on the Syrian petroleum industry... and introduced a blanket ban on Americans conducting business with the regime or its oil industry” (Huffington Post, 2011).

In addition to these unilateral actions the United States took, they also strongly pushed for the United Nations Security Council to pass a resolution condemning Assad’s crackdown and adopting economic sanctions against Syria. Both Russia and China vetoed this proposal. According to the United Nations meetings coverage from October 4, 2011, “the failed resolution would have called for a Syrian-led political process, including the Syrian opposition and all sectors of society, to address the legitimate aspirations of Syria’s population in an environment free from fear and extremism” (The United Nations, 2011). Russia and China were two of the nations who viewed economic sanctions against Assad as being counterproductive. They also stressed the importance of non-intervention and respecting a nation’s sovereignty. “The representative of the Russian Federation said that his country’s emphasis on the non-

acceptability of military intervention had not been taken into account and he warned that the collapse of President Assad's Government could destabilize the entire region... 'We're not advocates of the Assad regime' he said, stressing that the violence was unacceptable, but adding that a portion of the Syrian opposition movement had not hidden its extremist bent, hoping for foreign sponsors" (The United Nations, 2011). Upon the failure of the Security Council in reaching a resolution against the Assad regime, "the representative of the United States expressed outrage over the Council's failure to take minimum steps to protect civilians in Syria after long, hard negotiations" (The United Nations, 2011).

Relations between the two nations were again further strained when Syrian security forces failed to protect the American ambassador to Syria, Robert Ford, from being attacked by mobs at least twice. This led to the US once again recalling their ambassador from Syria, this time for security reasons. According to a *New York Times* article from October 2011, ambassador Ford "has been outspoken in criticizing Syria's crackdown on popular protests" and had "left the country because of what American officials called threats to his safety" (The New York Times, 2011). The article continues to describe the series of events that led to Ford being attacked by mobs. Ford had "traveled to Hama in July, when government forces had withdrawn from the city and hundreds of thousands of people were demonstrating in the streets. The visit apparently infuriated the government... In September, dozens of pro-government Syrians attempted to assault Mr. Ford's delegation, attacking its motorcade as it traveled to a meeting with Hassan Abdel-Azim, an opposition figure in Damascus. Crowds then tried to break into an office where the meeting was being held, trapping Mr. Ford for 90 minutes" (The New York Times, 2011). This latest withdrawal of an American ambassador to Syria set the stage for the incoherent and

disjointed American policy towards Syria which has manifested itself since about the start of 2012.

Timeline of Protests and Syrian Civil War

The documented series of events of the Syrian civil war are long and vary greatly depending on the perspective of the documenter. The toll the war has taken on human life, however, cannot be spun to forward someone's agenda. The war in Syria has gone on for five years now, with at least 250,000 people killed. Millions of others have become refugees in other countries. The United Nations estimates that 17.9 million people still live in Syria, compared to 24.5 million before the war started. The five years of war have cost the Syrian economy about \$255 billion. Unemployment rates are now over 50%, compared to 14% in 2011. About 70% of the population live in extreme poverty, lacking basic food and non-food items. In regime-held areas, the price of foods such as bread, rice, eggs, and flour has gone up between 150% and 525%. In rebel-held areas such as Deir al-Zour and Eastern Ghouta, the price of these food items has gone up between 1,500% and 20,000%. Furthermore, the number of health professionals throughout Syria has decreased by about 55% from before the war. (BBC News, 2016).

The main events of the Syrian civil war began in March 2011 in the city of Daraa, first as protests against the arrest and alleged beating of 15 schoolboys for painting anti-government graffiti on the walls of a school. After two weeks of bloody protests, unrest spreads to other cities, including Homs and the suburbs of Damascus. On April 22, 2011, the protests became the deadliest day up until that point, with 75 protestors killed. In May, the Syrian Army began deploying heavy armor into major cities, with both the US and EU imposing economic sanctions on Assad and his inner circle for the first time. On August 24, 2011, the Syrian National Council (SNC) was formed in Istanbul. The SNC is a coalition of groups in and outside of Syria who are

opposed to Assad. In November 2012, the SNC was incorporated into the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, which was formed in Qatar. In December 2012, the National Coalition was formally recognized as the “legitimate representative” of the Syrian people by the US, Britain, France, Turkey and the Gulf States. In October 2011, the United Nations fails to pass a resolution condemning Assad’s government due to vetoes by both Russia and China. In February 2012, Russia and China veto another UN resolution aimed at Assad’s government because it did not include sanctions on anti-Assad opposition groups (RT International, 2016).

In March 2012, the UN ratified a non-binding peace plan drafted by Kofi Annan, the former UN secretary-general. Syria accepts Annan’s six-point plan, which demands a ceasefire, the immediate withdrawal of tanks and artillery from residential areas and access for humanitarian aid. However, Annan’s peace plan fails when at least 116 people, mostly women and children, were killed in the village of Houla, with both sides blaming the other for the massacre. Days after this attack, France, the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, Spain, Canada, and Australia expel senior Syrian diplomats. In June 2012, a representative of the Free Syrian Army said the opposition had no intention of committing to the UN-brokered ceasefire. They instead wanted a no-fly zone and a buffer zone to be implemented, with the main goal of toppling the Assad government, to which a UN chief rejected it. On March 19, 2013, the first widely-known chemical attack happened near Aleppo, with a second fatal chemical attack taking place in Ghouta in August 2013. The user of the chemical weapons became another international point of contention, with the US blaming Assad and Russia blaming the rebels (RT International, 2016).

In July 2013, Barack Obama considered using military force in Syria, after putting down his 'red line' in a scenario in which chemical weapons were used; which they were. In September 2013, the UN said it had "clear and convincing" evidence that sarin gas was used in the aforementioned incident. However, President Obama backtracked from his threat of military force, saying that congressional support for military intervention would strengthen the response to the alleged chemical attacks. The Syrian government eventually agreed to a deal with Russia in which it would hand over its chemical weapons to international supervisors. In October 2013, inspectors began destroying Syria's chemical weapons arsenal, which was said to include about 1000 tons of toxic agents. In December 2013, the US and UK suspend non-lethal supplies to rebels over concerns that they could end up in the hands of the Islamic State. In the beginning of 2014, peace talks brokered by the US and Russia began in Geneva, although they did not amount to any real change on the ground (RT International, 2016).

In the summer of 2014, the Islamic State began gaining ground in both Iraq and Syria, killing 270 Syrian soldiers in one of ISIS' biggest attacks to date. In September 2014, the US-led coalition began flying sorties above Syria, with the aim of taking out ISIS. In February 2015, a huge influx of Europeans and other foreigners began traveling to Iraq and Syria in order to join ISIS. By April 2015, roughly 22,000 foreign fighters from 100 countries had gone to Iraq and Syria to join ISIS. By August 2015, the European refugee crisis had become the worst since World War II, with a record number of 107,500 asylum seekers crossing EU borders in July 2015. In September 2015, Russia began launching anti-ISIS operations in Syria. Beginning in February 2016 and continuing till today, ceasefires brokered by the US and Russia have sought to end hostilities in Syria as the world tries to agree to a transitional government in order to end the war (RT International, 2016).

With the phenomenon that is the Arab Spring having gone through various North African countries such as Egypt and Tunisia, many viewed the protests in Syria as another populist revolution that would force Assad to resign in the same fashion that Mubarak and Ben Ali did. However, it quickly became clear that Assad would not step down without a fight.

Theoretical / Conceptual Perspective

The two main ideologies that are at odds and are seemingly causing the paralysis and incoherence in American foreign policy towards the Syrian war can be broadly identified as realism and liberalism. These are two of many international relations theories that “entail the development of conceptual frameworks and theories to facilitate the understanding and explanation of events and phenomena in world politics, as well as the analysis and informing of associated policies and practices” (IR Theory, 2015). In addition to realism and liberalism, there are also many other international relations theories that will not be analyzed in this paper. One of the largest of these theories is constructivism. Constructivism rejects the assumption that a state of anarchy is a structural condition inherent in the system of states. It instead argues that it is possible to change the anarchic nature of the system of states (IR Theory, 2015). Another international relations theory that will not be analyzed in this paper is feminism. This argues that “traditional IR thinking has avoided thinking of men and women in the capacity of embodied and socially constituted subjects by subsuming them in other categories, too readily accepting that women are located inside the typically separate sphere of domestic life, and retreating to abstractions that mask a masculine identity” (IR Theory, 2015). Therefore, some who subscribe to the theory of feminism seek to critique and re-appropriate stories told about the proper scope of IR, revise war and peace narratives, and re-evaluate women and development in the

international system (IR Theory, 2015). However, in this paper, the first conceptual perspective that will be analyzed is realism.

Realism

According to the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, realism is a conceptual perspective and international relations theory that assumes “that power is (or ought to be) the primary end of political action... on the international stage, nation states are seen as the primary agents that maximize, or ought to maximize, their power” (IEP, 2016). Adhering to the ideology of realism means that the United States, Syria, and all other countries are the main units in a system in which nations compete for dominance and power amongst themselves. Realism has a long history, first “being evident in Thucydides’ *Peloponnesian War*. It was expanded on by Machiavelli in *The Prince*, and others such as Thomas Hobbes, Spinoza, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau followed. In the late nineteenth century it underwent a new incarnation in the form of social Darwinism, whose adherents explained social and hence political growth in terms of a struggle in which only the fittest (strongest) cultures or polities would survive” (IEP, 2016).

According to realism, “the international community is characterized by anarchy, since there is no overriding world government that enforces a common code of rules... without a supreme international power or tribunal, states view each other with fear and hostility, and conflict, or the threat thereof, is endemic to the system” (IEP, 2016). Furthermore, realism argues that “whatever the actual state of international affairs, nations should pursue their own interests” (IEP, 2016). In pursuit of survival, states will attempt to amass resources. A nation’s power depends on the resources it has; it’s military, economic, and political capabilities.

One of the main currents of realist thought today is neorealism. Neorealism grew out of the end of the Cold War during the 1970s and from the growth of international and non-governmental organizations.

This development led to a revival of idealist thinking, which became known as neoliberalism or pluralism. While accepting some basic assumptions of realism, the leading pluralists, Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, have proposed the concept of complex interdependence to describe this more sophisticated picture of global politics... The realist response came most prominently from Kenneth N. Waltz, who reformulated realism in international relations in a new and distinctive way... Waltz made an effort to avoid any philosophical discussion of human nature, and set out instead to build a theory of international politics analogous to microeconomics. He argues that states in the international system are like firms in a domestic economy and have the same fundamental interest: to survive” (Stanford University, 2010).

One of the largest differences between liberalism and realism is the unimportance with which realist trailblazers such as Waltz view non-state actors:

According to Waltz, the uniform behavior of states over centuries can be explained by the constraints on their behavior that are imposed by the structure of the international system... The units of the international system are states. Waltz recognizes the existence of non-state actors, but dismisses them as relatively unimportant... Consequently, Waltz sees power and state behavior in a different way from the classical realists. For Morgenthau power was both a means and an end, and rational state behavior was understood as simply the course of action that would accumulate the most power. In contrast, neorealists assume that the fundamental interest of each state is security and would therefore concentrate on the distribution of power (Stanford University, 2010).

Taking realism as a whole, it is understandable that the demise of other states will only be for the benefit of other nations. It is conceivable that someone who subscribes to this ideology would want to diminish the power of states that refuse to cooperate with it. Another facet of realism is ignoring morality for the greater good of the nation, or in fact, the world: “... attempting to be moral will be detrimental to the national interest or for the world as a whole, and therefore morality ought to be ignored” (IEP, 2016). In this case study, a despot like Assad, who runs his country in a way that strengthens America’s enemies and weakens America’s allies, is better off being deposed. As shown above, Assad’s relations with the United States have been

cool at best, and very friendly to countries such as Iran and Russia. In this sense, it is feasible that governmental agencies such as the CIA would want to pursue a campaign of regime change against Assad.

Liberalism

On the other hand, liberalism is a school of thought that “sees non-state actors as highly important in the international system” (International Relations, 2016). Liberalism also suggests that “individuals within a society can have very different calculated goals compared to a state leader; the idea of a unified domestic front for a state does not exist” (International Relations, 2016). Furthermore, “liberalists believe that there is not a competition for power and resources. Instead, in the anarchical state, states are best off not by competing, but rather by cooperating. Thus, there is a strong focus on regional and international organizations. Such organizations can help the international community reach continual peaceful outcomes, which are possible to liberals” (International Relations, 2016). As a result of this belief in the possibility of peaceful outcomes and cooperation, liberalists also believe that “if two states both benefit from an agreement, that this would be a policy option worth considering, regardless of how well off the deal makes the other state... [liberalists] believe international relations need not be a zero-sum game, as many states feel secure enough to maximize their own gains regardless of what accrues to others” (International Relations, 2016).

More specifically, there are two major currents of thought within liberalism. One of these is classical liberalism, which “favors laissez-faire economic policy (minimal economic intervention and taxation by the state beyond what is necessary to maintain individual liberty, peace, security and property rights), and opposes the welfare state (provision of welfare services by the state, and the assumption by the state of primary responsibility for the welfare of its

citizens)” (The Basics of Philosophy, 2008). The second major stream of thought within liberalism is social liberalism. This argues that

governments must take an active role in promoting the freedom of citizens, and that real freedom can only exist when citizens are healthy, educated and free from dire poverty. Social Liberals believe that this freedom can be ensured when governments guarantee the right to an education, health care and a living wage, in addition to other responsibilities such as laws against discrimination in housing and employment, laws against pollution of the environment, and the provision of welfare, all of which would be supported by a progressive taxation system (The Basics of Philosophy, 2008).

President Obama subscribes to this school of thought and that is shown by his desire to work with states that are normally considered to be enemies, such as Russia and Iran, to bring about peace in Syria. It is also shown by his desire to work within and alongside institutions, such as the United Nations and Congress. This also explains why American policy in Syria has been so disconnected. The two main decision-makers in foreign policy, the President and the CIA, have been at odds over how to proceed with Assad due to their conflicting worldviews.

Methodology

Almost all of the sources observed and analyzed are qualitative sources. These include editorials, journal articles, press releases, news bulletins and graphics. Sources also include declassified reports from the State and Defense Departments, as well as information released by WikiLeaks. Articles written by current and former CIA agents were also used in this analysis. Material used comes from American, British, Syrian, and Russian media outlets, among others. A collection of news from various countries is employed in an attempt to minimize the effects of media bias and potential propaganda from different sides of the war. This analysis is based off of a synthesis of actions and statements from both the White House and the CIA with respect to events and actions in, and relating to, the Syrian civil war.

Main Body

Obama Administration Actions

The actions of President Obama in Syria from the start of the war in 2011 until today have been many and varied. When attempting to describe Obama's main actions in a five-year-long civil war, perhaps it would be prudent to observe his administration's national security strategy. At the start of 2015, National Security Advisor Susan Rice gave remarks that have been released by The White House. In these remarks, Rice outlines their plan to fight terrorism coming out of places such as Syria.

At the same time, we seek a Middle East that's more secure, prosperous, and where democracy can take root. That's the ultimate vision we're working toward with partners throughout the region... We'll keep investing in the ability of our Gulf partners, like Saudi Arabia and the UAE, to deter aggression, even as we deepen our cooperation on regional challenges. Since Libya, Syria, and Yemen confront persistent violence and instability, we'll protect our people, work with partners to shrink terrorist safe havens, and support those working to achieve political and social reform (The White House, 2015).

This commitment to security and peace is unsurprising. However, the desire to work alongside other nations, is. The push for democracy in the Middle East with help from partners in the region, and with a deepening of cooperation with those countries is a staple within the actions and goals of the Obama administration. President Obama shows that he is not one to act unilaterally; cooperation with other nations and through international and domestic institutions is of paramount importance to him. This point is also highlighted in Rice's remarks, when she says that, "Our national security leadership is united around this shared vision and agenda. And, we are eager to work with Congress to restore the vital bi-partisan center to U.S. foreign policy" (The White House, 2015). Unlike previous administrations that became entangled in wars

without the approval of institutions, President Obama and his administration make it a point that they will actively seek to work within these institutions.

Obama's policies and actions with regards to the Syrian civil war have come under scrutiny and sometimes, outright mockery, over the years. Paul J. Saunders, writing in *The National Interest*, expresses confusion at the main goals of Obama's policy in Syria and wonders about what he deems to be a disjointed and incoherent policy.

... the administration could have decided to arm and assist a Syrian force of sufficient power to remove Assad. The president has attempted this in a halting and half-hearted manner, constrained by efforts to avoid inadvertently bolstering terrorist elements. Together with the hasty U.S. withdrawal from Iraq and the administration's hesitation in defining and implementing a clear strategy earlier in Syria's civil war, the administration's slow program to arm the opposition actually ended up facilitating the rise of the Islamic State and of other extremist anti-Assad groups like the Al Qaeda-linked Nusra Front (The National Interest, 2015).

Saunders expresses his frustration at his perception of a hesitant and slow policy which does not have a clear strategy, and which he thinks has led to an increase in the size and power of extremist rebel groups, whose interests certainly do not align with America's interests. He continues his analysis of Obama's Syria policy by describing it as "an increasingly intractable mess produced by nearly five years of zigzags and detours around various obstacles without a clear sense of direction" (The National Interest, 2015). He goes further by stating that Obama's lack of a strategy has indirectly contributed to a myriad of tragedies and crises that have played out across the globe.

Still, the principal product of the president's Syria policy has been a longer war, with all its associated costs – more casualties, more destruction, more refugees, more terrorism and more spillover. By the fall of 2015, the consequences extended well beyond Syria, including a destabilizing flood of migrants into Europe, a terrorist bomb on a Russian passenger plane and November's horrific attack in Paris and Turkish-Russian confrontation. America's failed policy also created an attractive geopolitical opportunity for Moscow, whose air strikes in Syria simultaneously challenge the United States and further complicate efforts to end the war (The National Interest, 2015).

While the author perhaps does go too far in his critique of what he deems to be Obama's Syria policy (or the lack thereof), it is not the only scathing review of said policy. Rupert Cornwell, of *The Independent*, more closely summarizes what he views to be Obama's Syria policy with similar disdain and contempt. As Cornwell explains:

Obama has been America's leader since the Syrian crisis began in 2011, and since then it has been much talk but little action. The Assad regime, we were told, must fall, and would do so quickly. Yet the US did not give aid to rebel groups that might have made this happen, nor did it set up a safe area for civilians in northern Syria, protected by a US-enforced no-fly zone, as many were urging at the time. Then came Obama's infamous declaration about Bashar al-Assad crossing 'a red line' if he used chemical weapons against civilians. The regime did use them, but Obama blinked and did nothing – other than allow Russia, protector power of Assad, to take the initiative in negotiating a deal to get rid of these weapons (The Independent, 2016).

Even with this outrage directed at a perceived lack of policy regarding Syria, some media outlets have also argued the opposite: that in fact, there is not much the Obama administration could do to improve the lives of Syrian citizens. As stated by Emma Ashford of *Vox*:

As the Syrian civil war moves inexorably toward a sixth year of conflict, calls for US intervention are once again on the upswing. Advocates of increased intervention in the conflict focus on Syria's humanitarian tragedies, or on the need to oppose Russia. Underlying most of their arguments is the simple assumption that American intervention could improve the lives of Syria's citizens and bring a swift end to the conflict, if we only had the political and moral will to do so. Yet that assumption is fundamentally mistaken. Further US intervention has little chance of succeeding, and in fact is far more likely to worsen the conflict (Vox, 2016).

As Ashford continues to explain, pro-intervention arguments rest on the premise that further American involvement – be it supporting rebel groups, creating a no-fly zone, or sending American troops to Syria – has great potential to improve the situation in Syria for its citizens. However, she claims that “in the context of Syria's intractable political rivalries and geopolitical realities, it is a mistaken assumption. US intervention is likely only to aggravate and lengthen Syria's conflict” (Vox, 2016). She then concludes the piece with an explanation as to why a perceived lack of strategy in Syria by the Obama administration isn't exactly accurate:

The risks associated with further US intervention in Syria are significant, including the potential for a direct conflict with Russia, or for broader regional war. Yet in focusing on the large potential costs, debates on US-Syria policy too often overlook the fact that further intervention will provide few if any benefits. It is easy to critique the Obama administration's inaction on Syria and the pursuit of diplomacy over intervention that has allowed Russia to occupy a dominant role in Syria's future. Given a choice between pursuing a flawed diplomatic settlement now on Russia's terms, or the potential for a marginally better settlement following several more years of intervention and bloody conflict, the administration has consistently chosen to accept the lesser of two evils. This focus on diplomacy backed by humanitarian efforts may also have a low probability of ending the Syrian civil war, at least in the near term. But unlike most of the alternatives, the White House's current strategy can help lay the groundwork for a future diplomatic settlement. And unlike the alternatives, it will do so without ratcheting up the conflict inside Syria (Vox, 2016).

Given these scathing critiques of (and some agreement with) Obama's policy in Syria, what has been his actual policy for the country? A piece in *The Huffington Post* by Alastair Crooke attempts to explain just that. Explaining rising tensions between the US and Russia, Crooke talks about the moment the US sought to deescalate these tensions. "...the White House must have got the message because at Tuesday's press conference in Moscow, Kerry said: 'The United States and our partners are not seeking so-called regime change.' He added that the focus is no longer 'on our difference about what can or cannot be done immediately about Assad' ... Kerry also called demands by the 'moderate' opposition that Assad step down before peace negotiations begin a 'nonstarter'" (The Huffington Post, 2015). Crooke continues by musing that these statements may be reflecting a shift in America's position towards Syria. "... Washington may be coming to the understanding that neither Russia nor Iran nor Hezbollah believe for one second the U.S. narrative that if Assad stepped down, somehow ISIS would melt away, and that responsible rebels would turn against ISIS to finish them off... It seems that Kerry has grasped that for America to insist on the 'Assad must go' policy simply implies inevitable war with Russia, Iran and Hezbollah. Perhaps it was this which finally persuaded Kerry that the policy must change" (The Huffington Post, 2015). Crooke observes a larger willingness in allowing

Assad to remain in some sort of capacity in a political transition. This is a significant change from insisting that Assad had to go.

But even with these multiple observations and analyses by political pundits and editorial writers, what do President Obama and those close to him have to say about their policy in Syria? A statement by President Obama released by The White House on February 4, 2012, quotes him as saying, “I strongly condemn the Syrian government’s unspeakable assault against the people of Homs and I offer my deepest sympathy to those who have lost loved ones. Assad must halt his campaign of killing and crimes against his own people now. He must step aside and allow a democratic transition to proceed immediately” (The White House, 2012). After the US determined that Assad used chemical weapons against civilians, Obama released another statement on August 31, 2013.

Ten days ago, the world watched in horror as men, women and children were massacred in Syria in the worst chemical weapons attack of the 21st century. Yesterday the United States presented a powerful case that the Syrian government was responsible for this attack on its own people... Now, after careful deliberation, I have decided that the United States should take military action against Syrian regime targets. This would not be an open-ended intervention. We would not put boots on the ground. Instead, our action would be designed to be limited in duration and scope. But I’m confident we can hold the Assad regime accountable for their use of chemical weapons, deter this kind of behavior, and degrade their capacity to carry it out... I’ve long believed that our power is rooted not just in our military might, but in our example as a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. And that’s why I’ve made a second decision: I will seek authorization for the use of force from the American people’s representatives in Congress... So just as I will take this case to Congress, I will also deliver this message to the world. While the U.N. investigation has some time to report on its findings, we will insist that an atrocity committed with chemical weapons is not simply investigated, it must be confronted (The White House, 2013).

In this statement from late August, 2013, Obama is adamant that the US will take limited military action against Assad for his use of chemical weapons. He also vows to seek the approval of Congress and the United Nations before fully committing to any sort of military action. Before

the use of chemical weapons, Obama was merely stating that Assad had to step aside. After the chemical attacks, Obama significantly upped the ante on potential repercussions against Assad.

However, these threats of military action against Assad never materialized. As Jeffrey Goldberg explains in *The Atlantic*, “Obama entered the White House bent on getting out of Iraq and Afghanistan; he was not seeking new dragons to slay” (The Atlantic, 2016). As further explained by Goldberg, Obama initially did not act against Assad because “he assumed, based on the analysis of U.S. intelligence, that Assad would fall without his help... But as Assad clung to power, Obama’s resistance to direct intervention only grew. After several months of deliberation, he authorized the CIA to train and fund Syrian rebels, but he also shared the outlook of his former defense secretary, Robert Gates, who had routinely asked in meetings, ‘Shouldn’t we finish up the two wars we have before we look for another?’” (The Atlantic, 2016). Although Obama did permit the CIA to train and fund rebels, he was incredibly hesitant about getting involved in Syria for a large variety of reasons. So when Obama did declare his red line, “even his own advisers were surprised. ‘I didn’t know it was coming,’ his secretary of defense at the time, Leon Panetta, told me. I was told that Vice President Joe Biden repeatedly warned Obama against drawing a red line on chemical weapons, fearing that it would one day have to be enforced” (The Atlantic, 2016). After surprisingly declaring the red line of using chemical weapons in front of the world and taking his staff off guard, Obama was seemingly adamant on enforcing it. “Obama had already ordered the Pentagon to develop target lists. Five Arleigh Burke – class destroyers were in the Mediterranean, ready to fire cruise missiles at regime targets... All week, White House officials had publicly built the case that Assad had committed a crime against humanity” (The Atlantic, 2016). However, as Goldberg explains, right before it was time to order strikes against Assad’s infrastructure and capabilities, “the president told his

national-security aides that he planned to stand down. There would be no attack the next day; he wanted to refer the matter to Congress for a vote. Aides in the room were shocked. Susan Rice, now Obama's national-security adviser, argued that the damage to America's credibility would be serious and lasting. Others had difficulty fathoming how the president could reverse himself the day before a planned strike" (The Atlantic, 2016).

In addition to this reversal on striking Assad, other policy changes toward Syria came about when Russia began flying sorties and attacking rebels; in coordination with Assad and his troops. These changes also came about after the ISIS attacks in Paris. "Since the Russian military intervention in Syria upended the military balance created by the victories of the al-Qaeda affiliate al-Nusra Front and its allies last year, the Obama administration has quietly retreated from its former position that 'Assad must go'" (MintPress News, 2016). As further explained by Gareth Porter,

the initial Obama administration's public stance on the Russian air campaign in Syria... suggested that the United States was merely waiting for Russia's intervention to fail... The administration appeared bent on insisting that Russia give into the demand of the US and its allies for the departure of President Bashar al-Assad from power. But the ISIS terror attacks in Paris focused the political attention of Europeans and Americans alike on the threat from ISIS terrorism and the need for cooperation with Russia to combat it (MintPress News, 2016).

Porter concludes by stating that "the Obama administration is no longer counting on a military balance favorable to the armed opposition to Assad to provide a reason for concessions by the regime" (MintPress News, 2016). This implies that the main stance of Obama, which has been that Assad must go, is no longer on the table. The entry of Russia into the war, coupled with ISIS attacks on European soil, led to this change in policy.

What has been Obama's policy since? According to Michael Ignatieff and Leon Wieseltier, there has not been much of a policy from the Obama administration since the

aforementioned shift. The policy has seemingly been to take a back seat to Assad and Russia and to no longer seriously assist the Syrian opposition. In the eyes of Ignatieff and Wieseltier, this inaction is abominable and has led to the death of many innocent people.

As Russian planes decimate Aleppo, and hundreds of thousands of civilians in Syria's largest city prepare for encirclement, blockade and siege – and for the starvation and the barbarity that will inevitably follow – it is time to proclaim the moral bankruptcy of American and Western policy in Syria... The moral bankruptcy has been long in the making: five years of empty declarations that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad must go, of halfhearted arming of rebel groups, of allowing the red line on chemical weapons to be crossed and of failing adequately to share Europe's refugee burden as it buckles under the strain of the consequences of Western inaction. In the meantime, a quarter-million Syrians have died, 7 million have been displaced and nearly 5 million are refugees. Two million of the refugees are children. This downward path leads to the truly incredible possibility that as the Syrian dictator and his ruthless backers close in on Aleppo, the government of the United States, in the name of the struggle against the Islamic State, will simply stand by while Russia, Assad and Iran destroy their opponents at whatever human cost (The News & Observer, 2016).

With this apparent inaction since the administration shifted its policy goals from removing Assad to instead seeing ISIS as a bigger threat, what has been the Central Intelligence Agency been doing in the meantime?

Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Actions

The CIA has been running covert operations in Syria for about 70 years. According to *Global Research*,

In the late 1940s, U.S. policymakers grew alarmed when the Syrian government, bowing to public pressure, refused to let a U.S. oil company build a pipeline through its territory. Washington also found the strong anti-Western sentiment and the large Communist party in the country ominous. Concerned that Syria was 'drifting leftward', the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) laid plans to overthrow its three-year old civilian government. CIA operatives met with right-wing military leaders in Damascus to discuss installing a 'military-supported dictatorship' (Global Research, 2016).

CIA operations within Syria and the greater Middle Eastern region continued well into the 1950s and 1960s. According to Ben Fenton of *The Guardian*,

newly discovered documents show how in 1957 Harold Macmillan and President Dwight Eisenhower approved a CIA-MI6 plan to fake border incidents as an excuse for an invasion by Syria's pro-western neighbors, and then to 'eliminate' the most influential triumvirate in Damascus... By 1957... President Eisenhower felt he could no longer ignore the danger of Syria becoming a center for Moscow to spread communism throughout the Middle East. He and Mr. Macmillan feared Syria would destabilize pro-western neighbors by exporting terrorism and encouraging internal dissent. More importantly, Syria also had control of one of the main oil arteries of the Middle East, the pipeline which connected pro-western Iraq's oilfields to Turkey (The Guardian, 2003).

More recently, however, the CIA has been supplying Syrian rebels with arms and finances to fight Assad. Reports of this CIA program first began being published in the media around the mid-way point of 2012. Before the aforementioned policy shift of the administration, President Obama was signing secret orders that would help Syrian rebels and various opposition groups in their fight against Assad. As reported by Mark Hosenball of *Reuters*, "Obama's order, approved earlier this year and known as an intelligence 'finding', broadly permits the CIA and other U.S. agencies to provide support that could help the rebels oust Assad... Separately from the president's secret order, the Obama administration has stated publicly that it is providing some backing for Assad's opponents. That State Department said on Wednesday the U.S. government had set aside a total of \$25 million for 'non-lethal' assistance to the Syrian opposition" (Reuters, 2012). In addition to this report about the CIA's activities from 2012, a *Washington Post* article from the end of 2013 chronicles the expansion of CIA efforts in training Syrian opposition fighters. It also questions the efficiency and overall effects such training would have on the larger Syrian civil war.

The CIA is expanding a clandestine effort to train opposition fighters in Syria amid concern that moderate, U.S.-backed militias are rapidly losing ground in the country's civil war... But the CIA program is so miniscule that it is expected to produce only a few hundred trained fighters each month even after it is enlarged, a level that officials said will do little to bolster rebel forces that are being eclipsed by radical Islamists in the fight against the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad... The pace of the CIA program amounts to a trickle into the ranks of the opposition fighters, who total about 100,000. U.S. intelligence officials said that as many as 20,000 of those are considered

‘extremists’ with militant Islamist agendas... Former deputy CIA director Michael J. Morell said in a recent CBS interview that the most effective organizations on the battlefield in Syria are the Islamist factions. “And because they’re so good at fighting the Syrians, some of the moderate members of the opposition joined forces with them”, he said (The Washington Post, 2013).

The expansion of the effort to train opposition fighters in Syria did not, and has not, led to the emergence of a powerful, and legitimate, moderate rebel group that could effectively fight Assad’s forces. As explained above, it actually contributed to the empowerment of Islamist and fundamentalist groups.

This phenomenon is further discussed by Gartenstein-Ross and Barr in *The Daily Beast*. Echoing claims of the beginnings of the covert CIA-arming program as mentioned above in The Washington Post, they describe how “the program got off to a slow start, with rebel commanders grumbling that the CIA was stingy due to its concern that weapons would fall into extremists’ hands. As a result, moderate rebels were forced at times to ration ammunition. At least one rebel group severed its ties with the CIA and joined an Islamist-led coalition, while other CIA-backed rebels stopped fighting” (The Daily Beast, 2016). This report continues to document the cooperation between CIA-backed groups and Islamist groups by citing reports that

suggested that rebel gains in Idlib in April 2015 showcased the symmetries between CIA-backed forces and Nusra [al-Qaeda] when he attributed the rebels’ successes to suicide bombers (frequently deployed by Nusra and other jihadists) and ‘American anti-tank TOW missiles’. In southern Syria, the CIA-backed Southern Front fought alongside Nusra in the campaign to take the city of Deraa in June 2015. CIA-backed groups in northwestern Syria publicly acknowledged their relationship with the al Qaeda affiliate. A commander of Fursan ul-Haq, a rebel group that received TOW missiles through CIA channels, explained that “there is something misunderstood by world powers: we have to work with Nusra Front and other groups to fight” both Assad’s regime and the Islamic State (The Daily Beast, 2016).

This article continues to discuss how “because of Nusra’s strength, CIA-backed factions have entered what has been called a ‘marriage of necessity’ with the jihadist group, which is exploiting its position to gain access to American weapons” (The Daily Beast, 2016). The

authors of this article also make the case that it is important for the general public to have a debate about this questionable CIA program. Robert Ford, the former US ambassador to Syria, has argued that “by maintaining the supply of lethal support to moderate rebels, the CIA may ultimately be able to build up these factions as a viable alternative to Nusra, the Islamic State and Assad” (The Daily Beast, 2016). The authors go on to say that although the CIA program was not initiated for the sole purpose of strengthening jihadist groups, the effect its having now is that it is indirectly helping them gain ground in Syria, after it has spent the last 15 years fighting them (The Daily Beast, 2016).

These seemingly paradoxical actions taken by the CIA are also harped upon by Juan Cole from *The Nation*. Entitled, “Why is Washington Supporting Fundamentalist Jihadis in Syria?”, Cole explains how “what’s left of the previous Free Syrian Army [FSA] in the region is an alphabet soup of fundamentalists, some more moderate Muslim Brotherhood elements, others armed with a blueprint for a puritanical Salafi regime in which there is no room for secularists or religious minorities, or for democracy” (The Nation, 2016). Cole continues to bring up the fact that the CIA’s actions seem to be very short-sighted by stating that,

many former FSA units have defected to Al Qaeda or ISIS. The United States has been adamant in continuing to support the remnants of the FSA, even though many have either renounced democracy or pledged vengeance on Syria’s Shiites and other minorities, or insisted they will impose a fundamentalist vision of Islamic law on the entire population. The CIA claims to have “vetted” more than 30 such insurgent groups as having no ties to Al Qaeda. And then it passed to these fighters, through Saudi Arabia, TOW anti-tank munitions, making them formidable against Syrian armor. The problem is that the “vetted” groups keep showing up on the battlefield as de facto allies of Al Qaeda in Syria (The Nation, 2016).

The continued CIA support for these rebel groups runs contrary to what would be deemed to be logical interests as they pertain to American security. Arming groups that either fight alongside, or give their weapons to, jihadist groups is not necessarily a wise or prudent decision.

Nevertheless, this is by and large what the CIA has been doing in Syria since years before the civil war began in 2011.

As uncovered by Seymour Hersh in a piece in the London Review of Books, the CIA's assistance to the Syrian opposition began with taking weapons from Gaddafi's stockpiles in Libya and sending them to the Syrian opposition.

...the CIA-sponsored secret flow of arms from Libya to the Syrian opposition, via Turkey, had been underway for more than a year (it started sometime after Gaddafi's death on 20 October 2011). The operation was largely run out of a covert CIA annex in Benghazi, with State Department acquiescence. On 11 September 2012 the US ambassador to Libya, Christopher Stevens, was killed during an anti-American demonstration that led to the burning down of the US consulate in Benghazi; reporters for the Washington Post found copies of the ambassador's schedule in the building's ruins. It showed that on 10 September Stevens had met with the chief of the CIA's annex operation. The next day, shortly before he died, he met a representative from Al-Marfa Shipping and Maritime Services, a Tripoli-based company which... was known by the Joint Staff to be handling the weapons shipments. By the late summer of 2013... although many in the American intelligence community were aware that the Syrian opposition was dominated by extremists the CIA-sponsored weapons kept coming, presenting a continuing problem for Assad's army (Hersh, 2016).

This shows that the funneling of weapons by the CIA to the opposition wasn't just haphazard; there was a deliberate plan in place with the necessary oversight to facilitate a campaign that was meant to strengthen the Syrian opposition and to weaken Assad. Regardless of the results of this campaign, this points to a larger narrative by which the CIA's actions are explained by its adherence to realism, and by which Obama's actions are explained by his adherence to liberalism.

Main Findings

In the thesis, the claim was made that the CIA subscribes to realism and that President Obama's administration subscribes to liberalism. Here, the connections between their actions and their corresponding perspectives and ideologies will be drawn.

Matching Actions with Conceptual Perspectives – The CIA

The CIA's growth and influence in foreign-policy-making points to its desire to be able to control situations and nations that may or may not be out of its control. Its past attempts at regime change in Syria (and in other nations) in order to deter Russian influence and to gain access to oil, points to an organization that believes the demise of other nations can only strengthen America. This belief in a zero-sum game when it comes to power directly points to a belief in realism. The CIA is willing to bet that arming the Syrian opposition, which may or may not be overrun with jihadists, is a better policy than allowing Assad, a man who has much greater capabilities than the various rebel groups, to remain in power. This "my way or the highway" mentality can be attributed to an adherence to realism.

The fact that the CIA subscribes to the view that another entity's demise is for the benefit of America is underlined in a piece by Yochi Dreazen and Sean Naylor in *Foreign Policy*. As they explain, the CIA wields tremendous power and essentially has an open path to meeting its goals in the name of American security.

Since its creation in 1947, the CIA has steadily evolved from an agency devoted to its mission of spying on foreign governments to one whose current priority is tracking and killing individual militants in an increasing number of countries... To be sure, an empowered and largely autonomous CIA has global repercussions. Much of what the world associates with U.S. foreign policy since the 9/11 attacks – from drone strikes in the Middle East to the network of secret prisons around the world and torture that occurred within their walls – originated at Langley. And given the agency's dominance, the CIA seems bound to retain its outsize role in how the United States acts and is perceived abroad... Today, the CIA is the tip of the spear of the administration's growing effort to beat back the Islamic State, which controls broad stretches of Iraq and Syria. CIA officers in small bases along the Turkish and Jordanian borders have helped to find, vet, and train members of the so-called moderate Syrian opposition so they can fight to dislodge the Islamic State and, ultimately, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime in

Damascus. In addition, the agency is responsible for helping to funnel weapons and other supplies to rebels (Foreign Policy, n.d.).

This shows that the CIA has in fact outgrown its role and may be at its largest size ever. In a foreign policy structure that is supposed to be led by the president, the CIA's ambitions may have become the driving force in America's foreign policy as it pertains to Syria, and in fact, the rest of the world. Such ambitions subscribe to realism; and specifically the idea that foreign policy is a zero-sum game wherein the demise of entities standing in America's way only strengthens America. Dreazen and Naylor provide more evidence for this in their piece: "The targeted killing led to no discernible dissent or soul-searching within the CIA about the agency's increasing comfort with eliminating perceived enemies across the globe" (Foreign Policy, n.d.).

The realism aspect of the CIA's ambitions is also highlighted in a report from *The New Indian Express* that outlines 50 plots the CIA developed to oust Assad. According to this report, "President Obama vetoed 50 plans put to him by the CIA to engineer the downfall of the Assad regime in Syria, according to a former operative working on the project... The CIA, under then-leader David Petraeus, ended up running a scheme to arm rebels from the 'non-jihadist' Free Syrian Army – but it never reached a scale that outweighed regime support from Iran and the Lebanese militia Hezbollah" (The New Indian Express, 2016). These attempts by the CIA to implement regime change as an extension of the realist ideology are further documented in a damning report in *Medium* which highlights a declassified document from the Pentagon.

According to Nafeez Ahmed,

a declassified secret US government document obtained by the conservative public interest law firm, Judicial Watch, shows that Western governments deliberately allied with al-Qaeda and other Islamist extremist groups to topple Syrian dictator Bashir al-Assad. The document reveals that in coordination with the Gulf states and Turkey, the West intentionally sponsored violent Islamist groups to destabilize Assad, and that these "supporting powers" desired the emergence of a "Salafist Principality" in Syria to "isolate the Syrian regime" (Medium, 2015).

This is more evidence that the CIA is willing to gamble on installing Islamists in power than have Assad remain in the way of their interests. This point is also highlighted by Ahmed when he says that “in the wake of the rise of ISIS, intrusive new measures to combat extremism including mass surveillance... are being pursued on both sides of the Atlantic... yet the new Pentagon report reveals that, contrary to Western government claims, the primary cause of the threat comes from their own deeply misguided policies of secretly sponsoring Islamist terrorism for dubious geopolitical purposes” (Medium, 2015). This points directly to an adherence to realism because the CIA is showing that the state actor of Assad is more dangerous and needs to be taken down, whereas non-state actors such as ISIS and other jihadist rebel groups do not pose a real threat to American security. This adherence to realism is in sharp contrast to Obama’s adherence to liberalism and is a main contributor to America’s incoherent and disjointed Syria policy.

Matching Actions with Conceptual Perspectives – The Obama Administration

In Obama’s interview with Jeffrey Goldberg of *The Atlantic*, he was asked why he backtracked on implementing his red line against Assad if he used chemical weapons.

He listed the practical worries that had preoccupied him. “We had UN inspectors on the ground who were completing their work, and we could not risk taking a shot while they were there. A second major factor was the failure of Cameron to obtain the consent of his parliament” ... The fourth factor, he said, was of deeper philosophical importance. “This falls in the category of something that I had been brooding on for some time,” he said. “I had come into office with the strong belief that the scope of executive power in national-security issues is very broad, but not limitless” (The Atlantic, 2016).

The reasons Obama backtracked from implementing his red line show that he does, indeed, subscribe to liberalism. His faith in institutions such as the United Nations and the British parliament are signs of adherence to liberalism. Furthermore, his belief in limited executive power also aligns with a belief in idealism and in the state not necessarily being a unitary actor.

It points to a belief in separate entities within the government that can disagree over how to proceed over policy in a particular subject; in this case, Syria. Obama also affirmed the idea that he subscribes to liberalism and breaks away from the CIA in ideology in other parts of his interview with Jeffrey Goldberg.

Though he has so far ruled out the use of direct American power to depose Assad, he was not wrong, he argued, to call on Assad to go. “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.” “I am very much the internationalist,” Obama said in a later conversation. “And I am also an idealist insofar as I believe that we should be promoting values, like democracy and human rights and norms and values, because not only do they serve our interests the more people adopt values that we share ... but because it makes the world a better place (The Atlantic, 2016).

Not being an avid supporter of regime change shows that Obama does believe in cooperation and does not see international relations as a zero-sum game. Cooperation in this sense is defined as being willing to work with Assad and not force him out of power when it became clear that groups such as ISIS were probably a greater threat to American security than he was. Obama also explicitly states that he believes in promoting values such as democracy and human rights to other countries, which is a staple of liberalism.

Obama also seems to imply, in another part of this interview, that he strongly disagrees with the CIA’s methods of regime change and their assumed adherence to realism. For this reason, he wishes to cooperate and share leadership with other countries; another staple of liberalism.

The president also seems to believe that sharing leadership with other countries is a way to check America’s more unruly impulses. “One of the reasons I am so focused on taking action multilaterally where our direct interests are not at stake is that multilateralism

regulates hubris”, he explained. He consistently invokes what he understands to be America’s past failures overseas as a means of checking American self-righteousness. “We have history,” he said. “We have history in Iran, we have history in Indonesia and Central America. So we have to be mindful of our history when we start talking about intervening, and understand the source of other people’s suspicions” (The Atlantic, 2016).

Here is another indicator that Obama adheres to liberalism and is at odds with the CIA over how to proceed in a situation like Syria. The history in other countries that he mentions is taken to be about the CIA’s efforts at regime change in these places that has, he believes, resulted in more negative, than positive, effects. This ideological tension between President Obama and the CIA has resulted in an incoherent and unpredictable policy in Syria that has led to many great suffering among Syrians, as well as a loss of faith and trust in America abroad. Other nations and other peoples are having a difficult time trusting in America because of its current unpredictable, and sloppy, policies. In order for America to once again have a reliable and coherent policy, some policy recommendations need to be adhered to.

Policy Recommendations

These recommendations include an agreement on an ideology and a perspective that all parts of the foreign-policy establishment can agree upon. The conflict in ideology between the president and the CIA has led to a very messy and incoherent policy in Syria. This lack of a complete policy has contributed to the deaths of many innocents, an unprecedented refugee crisis, and a global threat of terrorism. In order for interests to be met, and peace to be secured, all parties that are privy to foreign-policy making need to be on the same page, in terms of ideology. In a case like this where both the president and the CIA see the world through different lenses, the CIA needs to be reined in so that it is in agreement with the president for America’s goal for the world, and for Syria in particular. The CIA working under and within the executive branch allows for a more coherent and successful foreign policy.

Furthermore, the CIA needs a cap on its size and role. It has outgrown its role in policy-making due to the *carte blanche* it has been afforded. In order for America's foreign policy to be more smooth and continuous between different presidents, the CIA must allow itself more flexibility in its goals and ambitions, worldwide.

Conclusion

America's foreign policy in Syria the last five years has been incredibly incoherent and largely unsuccessful. America's goals have been confusing, its interests have been unknown, and its actions have sometimes been contradictory. What explains this incoherence and confusion? This is explained by the disagreement and tension between President Obama and the CIA over ideologies. President Obama subscribes to liberalism, and the CIA subscribes to realism. This is evident through their actions, as they pertain to Syria. Each worldview calls for different actions that need to be taken in order to deal with an issue such as the Syrian civil war. This paramount disagreement between both entities has led to an incoherent and disjointed policy that has attracted much criticism and has left many people and nations disillusioned with America. It has also led to a loss of trust and questions about America's leadership in the world. In order for there to be a coherent and successful foreign policy in Syria, the CIA needs to work under and within the president, allowing itself the flexibility to agree with the president's worldview so that they can work together to create a complete and coherent foreign policy. This may be the only way America can lead an effort that brings peace to Syria.

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