

Crisis Syria: A Multi-Protagonist 'Theatre' of War

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Abstract

The Syrian Crisis, given vested interests of regional and global powers, has now become one of the most complex and protracted catastrophes. Six years after the onset of the conflict, the region had slowly moved towards the possibility of a negotiated settlement through discussions (which though inconclusive) remained ongoing. The chemical attacks on Khan Sheikhoun and the consequent unilateral missile attack by the United States (US) on the Al-Shayrat airbase shows lack of interest to engage in peace. In response to the missile attack, the decision by the Russians to strengthen the Syrian Army has augmented the severity of the situation. The article analyses the change of tactics by the US and President Trump's ensuing policy which shows the desire of his administration to rest on military superiority and its will to renew the era of US adventurism in a hotspot such as the Middle East. An analysis of his actions in Syria is accomplished through the prism of security and political complexities in the region and the interwoven roles of regional players.

Key words: Syrian Crisis, Regional Powers, Global Powers, Trump Administration, Russia.

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Introduction

The problems and demands of Southwest Asia and North Africa (the Middle East)¹ speak of the serious concerns and issues about the political orders in these realms which at times have led to mass riots and demonstrations. The 2011-13 crises in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Bahrain and Syria - aptly named the Arab Spring or Islamic Awakening - can be divided in two categories. In the first category, there are countries such as Tunisia and Egypt where the outcome was a change of government ending the demonstrations and upheavals. In the second group, there are those states which, due to continuing demonstrations, are still embroiled in instability and internal wars such as Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain. The reasons for this are particular to each.

This article primarily explores the reasons for the continuation of the crisis in Syria and the role of regional and non-regional powers, especially United States (US). Some politicians and academics note that different powers (regional and otherwise) with their own interests have complicated this ordeal. In their view, the solution is far from simple and the crisis is yet evolving. Others point out the recent military victories of the Syrian regime and suggest that the crisis is in its final stages.

The continuation of the conflict and the use of chemical and non-conventional weapons in Khan Sheikhoun in the province of Idlib in April 2017, which led to the death of innocent civilians (mainly children), critically changed and expanded the crisis.² This attack showed that the political solution to the Syrian crisis is yet not at hand and would not occur without a significant recalibration of the outlook of regional and non-regional powers. The main question here is, why the Trump

¹ Editor's Note: The countries in the North African region include those bordering the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea from Morocco to Sudan. The realm borders the Atlantic Ocean, the Sahara Desert, and the African Transition Zone. Egypt has territory in both Africa and Asia through its possession of the Sinai Peninsula. The second region, Southwest Asia, includes Turkey, Iran, the Middle East, and the Arabian Peninsula. The land on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea is frequently referred to as the Levant and is often included as a part of the Middle East. Technically, the term *Middle East* only includes the five countries of Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, and Iraq, but in common practice *Middle East* refers to all of Southwest Asia.

² The chemical attack reportedly killed 84 people.

administration made a tactical change in its opposition to the Syrian regime. The present assumption considering the lack of a solution to the crisis and the recent events (such as chemical attacks) is that the inability of the foreign policy of the US during the Obama era to solve the Syrian crisis led to the weakening of its influence there and the expansion of Russian influence (its main rival in the area). This led the new US administration to expand its use of military power to gain influence. This article is concerned with the Syrian crisis, the change in the US policy towards it, along with the role of various other regional protagonists and their interests in the region.

Dissecting an ‘International Crisis’

A crisis is the introduction of disorder and the disruption of balance in a system, and inherently includes tensions and clashes.³ The international system employs various variables which must remain in certain limits to keep it stable. A crisis suddenly changes these variables in all or parts of the system. An international political crisis is caused by events which uproot the balance of power in the international or regional political order beyond certain limits and which increase the danger of clashes and increased violence within and without.⁴ Measures such as direct and forceful actions using military hardware and hidden or apparent enmity pertain to this analysis. Added competition and threats make relations between governments unstable and the hostilities among governments lead to disruptions in the political international order.⁵ Michael Brecher describes the four stages of a crisis:

³ Mahmood Vaezi, *Political Crisis and Social Movements in the Middle East, Theories and Trends* (Tehran: Institute for Political and International Studies, 2011), 11-12.

⁴ Ali Asghar Kazemi, *Ravabet-e Beinolmelal dar Theory va Amal [International Relations in Theory and Practice]* (Tehran: Ghomes Publisher, 1993), 392-4.

⁵ Michael Brecher, *A Century of Crisis and Conflict in the International System, Theory and Evidence: Intellectual Odyssey III*, 1st ed. (Cham, ZG: Springer International Publishing, 2017); and Michael Brecher, *Crisis in World Politics, Rise and Fall of Crises*, trans. MirFardin Ghorishi (Tehran: Strategic Studies Research, 2003).

1. The inception of crisis: This predates the crisis itself and is limited in nature to a slight threat to the system which has not reached a level, which significantly threatens its values. Concerning Syria, this stage existed long ago due to its ethnic issues and politico-economic order.
2. The expansion of the crisis: Crisis has reached a serious level qualitatively leading to possible military clashes. A good measure is the increase in the level of the threat and the expansion of limited and unimportant clashes to larger and more serious ones. The Syrian crisis rapidly became a serious threat to the government leaving little time for it to react.
3. The resolving of the crisis: The stage of reduction of threats and the end to the crisis happens when the implications of the crisis for the assailants and other actors become evident. Threat levels, pressures and the possibility of military actions no longer exist and the sides believe that an agreement to end the conflict is in their favour. The benefits of peace, then, outweigh the possibility of military gains.⁶ There can be six methods to settle international conflicts:
 1. Withdrawal or voluntary cessation.
 2. Violent domination.
 3. Surrender or withdrawal due to threats of force.
 4. Political agreement.
 5. Referring the conflict to outside judgement.
 6. The acceptance of a new situation in lieu of a formal agreement.⁷
4. Post-crisis effects: This stage relates to the aftermath and eventualities after the cessation of the conflict which involves the effects of the crisis on the various sides and the international order

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Kaloiyaka Holisti, *The Basic Analysis of International Politics*, trans. Bahram Mostaghimi and Massoud Tarom Seri (Tehran: Institute for Political and International Studies, 2005), 718.

and subsystems. At this stage, the outcomes of the crisis are defined and each side measures the benefits and losses. This evaluation aims to consider the augmentation or reduction of the powers of each side and the new level of conflict which has remained post-crisis.⁸

Brecher believes that many crises exist in lieu of long-term enmity caused over several issues with periodical hostilities or wars. These conflicts then spread to related arenas. Long-term crisis and ensuing conflicts affect national identity and social cohesiveness. This is so even during periods when outward hostilities are not evident or when the crises have not occurred. According to him, such conflicts are not defined by specific events or even a collection of these events and are in reality an ongoing phenomenon.

With the start of the demonstrations in Syria, most players in the region including Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and other outside powers such as the US, Europe, and Russia were aware of their roles within the Syrian crisis.⁹

The Syrian Crisis

With the start of the second decade of the Twenty-First Century in the Middle East and North Africa, three upheavals shook Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt leading to the downfall of all three governments. The events of the Middle East soon spread to another state in the region- Syria. The spark of the revolution started with a few slogans on a wall by a few students in the border town of Daraa in 2011. These youth were then arrested and tortured by the security forces. When the parents of those arrested and the tribal leaders demanded the release of the youths, they were also arrested. This led to demonstrations, demands for freedom of political prisoners, cessation of emergency rule, a reduction of price of basic staples such as oil and foodstuff, an end to corruption, and a return of the exiles. The base

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Amir Nikoei and Hossein Behmanesh, "Players in Conflicting Players in Syria: Goals and Approaches," *Foreign Relations* 4, no.4 (2012).

of this insurrection soon included Deir ez-Zor, Hama, Homs, and eventually the whole country.¹⁰ The crisis, like any political, social or security-related issue, slowly became coloured by the force of other state actors such as Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and in time the US and Russia. Owing to the special geographical location of Syria and the conflicting interests of the parties, the Syrian crisis soon became a *bona fide* international crisis with each player attempting to affect its course with its own national interests in mind. Some of the regional powers including Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Israel with a view of their own potential and alliances, regional or otherwise, tried to weaken the influence of their rivals. Other international powers such as the US, Russia, and European Union (EU), which tried to advance their own aims and to lessen the influence of their rivals, gave support to the opposition factions. These Western powers soon decided that Syria (unlike Libya) should not be brought down through military intervention. The US and its European allies demanding an exit for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad (without destruction of the security, military structure) did not intervene directly in order to remove him. However, in a reversal of policy after six years of the Syrian crisis, the US unilaterally attacked a Syrian airbase¹¹ with the approval of some of its European and Middle Eastern allies. To understand this change in the US policy, it is important to look at the role of other important regional powers.

Role of Regional Powers in the Syrian Crisis

The Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) with its Shiite ideology and strategic eminence is an important protagonist in the region and any solution pertaining to security and political matters in the region without Iran's

¹⁰ Reinoud Leenders and Steven Heydemann, "Popular Mobilization in Syria: Opportunity and Threat and the Social Networks of the Early Risers," *Mediterranean Politics* 17, no. 2 (2012): 139-159, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13629395.2012.694041>.

¹¹ "Syria War: Why was Shayrat Airbase Bombed," *BBC News*, April 7, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-39531045>.

help is nearly impossible.¹² Due to its support to Palestine and the publically antagonistic stance towards Israel, Iran needs an ally (or allies) in the Middle East which strengthens or improves its position. After the Camp David Accords in 1978 and the exit of the Egyptian government from the anti-Israeli camp, the Alawite Syria which is close to the Shiites remains the sole opposition to Israel. The Syrian government being fiercely opposed to the Baathists in Baghdad and in response to the vacuum left by the Egyptian exit expanded its ties with Iran during the imposed war with Iraq.¹³ Hezbollah in Lebanon and close cooperation with Iran in defence of the Palestinians allowed the latter to expand its strategic depth in and around the Israeli borders through the Iran-Syria-Lebanon axis. Thus, Syria became a main channel of sending Iranian financial resources and supplies to Lebanon.¹⁴ Naturally, with the introduction of the anti-Assad and foreign-sponsored forces in Syria, armed or unarmed, Iran became involved in the Syrian conflict along with the Hezbollah. This strategic alliance allowed them to work in tandem with support of the Syrian regime, leading to many important victories for the latter in this conflict. Iran and Hezbollah's support to maintaining the current political structure in Syria has kept it in the Shiite axis. El-Labad notes:

Iran has been able through the Iranian-Syrian alliance, to extend its regional influence from western Iran, Iraq to Syria. Also, Syria guarantees the access of Iran to the line of Palestinian cause, which will achieve positive results for the Iranian regional project.¹⁵

Turkey, Syria's neighbour to the north, is another player in this crisis. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) did not want to see al-

¹² Mohammad Frazmand, *Iran and New Political Order in the Middle East, Iran and Arabs* (Tehran: Institute for Strategic Research, 2009), 42-3.

¹³ Ali Easmaeili, Hamid Niko and Mehdi Goal Mohammadi, *Foundation, Bases and Geopolitics of Islamic Awakening* (Tehran: Sorehmehr Publication, 2012), 274-5.

¹⁴ Ghasem Torabi, "Regional and World Rivalry in the International Arab," *Research Defense Research* 1, no. 2 (2012).

¹⁵ M. El-Labad, "The Iranian- Turkish Conflict on Syria and the Arab Vacuum," *Bidayat Journal* (2013): 29-32.

Assad fall, since Syria had become a symbol of its policy of engagement with the Arab World. 'Yet, the 2011 Syrian Uprising precipitated an escalating negative tit-for-tat between the two states at the leadership level.'¹⁶ Not only this, the cause of Turkey's entrance into this crisis is to be found in the 18 million Alawites that make up 20 per cent of Turkey and the Syrian Kurds which are in part secessionist.¹⁷ In June 2011, Turkey gave sanctuary to Syrian army defectors and helped them constitute the Free Syrian Army (FSA) - an anti-Assad armed force. Damascus retaliated by allowing the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)-affiliated Syrian Kurdish party, the PYD, to take over much of the Kurdish inhabited Syrian border zone with Turkey.¹⁸ Turkish support of Sunni forces in post-Assad era could not only empower it against its neighbours, but in addition significantly lessen its Kurdish and Alawite liabilities. Thus, creating a corridor for the entrance of *Jihadi* and *Takfiri* forces¹⁹ from Turkey into Syria became a priority for the Turkish government. This policy, for a limited time, made Turkey a Western ally in removing al-Assad from power, and on a collision course with Russia, which is another player in the crisis and an ally of the government. The end of the regime could make Turkey the most influential actor in the region and its popular secular model suitable for Syria and other regional powers:

¹⁶ Raymond Hinnebusch, "Back to Enmity: Turkey-Syria Relations since the Syrian Uprising," *Orient* 56, no. 1 (2015): 14-22 (14).

¹⁷ Amir Sajedi, "The Syrian Crisis and the Intervention of Foreign Powers," *Research Letter of International Relations* 6, no. 24 (2013).

¹⁸ Hinnebusch, "Back to Enmity."

¹⁹ Elie Podeh, "Egypt's Struggle against the Militant Islamic Groups," in Efraim Inbar and Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, eds., *Religious Radicalism in the Greater Middle East* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 43-61. Podeh distinguishes between conservative Islamists, *Jihadi* Muslims, and *Takfiri* groups. Like *Jihadis*, *Takfiri* groups advocate armed struggle against the secular regime, invoking concepts like *al-hakimiyya* (God's sovereignty), and *al-takfir* (branding as apostate). However, *Takfiri* groups are more extreme as they make no distinction between the regime and the ordinary population when employing violence.

In addition to this, Turkey was committed to an alliance with Israel. The signing of the military cooperation agreement between Turkey and Israel led to the adoption of the Turkish foreign policy for escalating situations towards Syria.²⁰

It is important to note that while in 2010, relations between the two countries deteriorated because of the Freedom Flotilla crisis, 'Israel sees Turkey as an indispensable ally because it needs to use Turkey's strategic depth to defend itself.'²¹

The Saudi Wahhabi government which is opposed to Shi'ism is another player in the Syrian crisis. Saudi Arabia has remained in competition and opposition to Iran since the Islamic Revolution in 1979.²² After the fall of Saddam in 2003 and the improvement of the balance of power in favour of Iran in the Middle East, the Saudi government with its approach towards the West and through its alliance with regional Arab governments has tried to limit the advancement of Iranian influence in the Arab world.²³ The penetration by the Iranians in Lebanon and Iraq (among other Arab nations) and the downfall of its allies namely Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and Abdullah Saleh of Yemen in 2011 and 2012 respectively, has been additionally worrisome for Saudi Arabia.²⁴ At the onset of the Syrian crisis, Riyadh condemned the repression and recalled its ambassador from Damascus in August of 2011 and gave support to the armed opposition and protesters. Their rapid entry into the crisis could be interpreted as attempting to change the power balance in the Middle East in an effort to strengthen their position. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) has sought the removal of the Assad government through financial and military support of the opposition in Syria and with its Arab allies to

²⁰ Mira A. Abdel Hameed and Mohamed Hussein Mostafa, "Turkish Foreign Policy towards Syria since 2002," *Asian Social Science* 14, no. 2 (2018): 57-68 (58), <http://www.ccsenet.org/journal/index.php/ass/article/view/71742/40186>.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 58.

²² Amir Sajedi, "Iran's Relations with Saudi Arabia," *India Quarterly* 49, no.1-2 (1993): 75-96.

²³ Seyed Jalal Dehghani Firozabadi and Mehdi Farazi, "Islamic Awakening and the Security of Islamic Republic of Iran," *Islamic Revolution Studies* 9, no. 28 (2012): 291-2.

²⁴ Amir Sajedi, "Yemen Crisis in the Regional Context," *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs* 5, no. 3 (2014): 65-85.

eventually eject Syria from the Arab union to further weaken it politically. The KSA leadership sought to disrupt the Iranian alliance with Lebanon by supporting the *Takfiris* fighting in Syria and weakening its government. This aimed to reduce the Iranian influence in the Middle East and the Arab world. They viewed the attack on the Al-Shayrat airbase as part of rebalancing of power in the region.

The government of Israel has paid added attention to its security since the onset of the Syrian crisis. The national security of Israel has traditionally been defined through its strategic military position via its Arab and non-Arab neighbours which are its opposition in the Middle East. After the Islamic Revolution, the Israeli regime over the past 39 years has considered Iran an even larger threat than the current Arab governments. The political and military support of Iran of the Hezbollah in Lebanon (through Syria) which provided a safe route to transfer resources, made Israelis look for ways to disrupt this threat. For this reason reducing the Syrian Army, breaking up the corridor, and manoeuvring Iranian military support became a top priority. Israel's support of armed Syrian opposition, the treatment of some of its injured, and air assaults on the transport route to Lebanon through Syria should be seen as attempts to disrupt this axis of resistance and the creation of a new politico-security understanding in the region.²⁵ To this end, the Netanyahu government repeatedly demanded that the US should attack Syria (during the Obama administration) and to overthrow Assad's regime and destroy its chemical weapons. The Obama administration paid scant attention to this request, and only when Syria was accused of using chemical weapons, did the US work with Russia in order to remove its chemical weapons.

²⁵ Hossein Amir Abdollahian, *Failure of the Greater Middle East Plan in the Wave of Islamic Awakening* (Tehran: Center for International Research and Education, 2013), 188.

Russia and the Syrian Crisis

The collapse of the Soviet Union reduced its status to a ‘second-class’ power with its foreign policy being unconcerned with the Middle East. However, after two decades during which its economy significantly improved along with its political standing, the Putin government began inculcating a bigger role in international politics. The West tried to isolate Russia strategically in particular areas such as the Middle East, but since 2002, the Kremlin started focusing on this region by pursuing friendly relations with Muslim countries. The Russian government, since 2003, in order to diffuse Western pressure on Iran cooperated with Tehran in the atomic arena and with the Syrian government in its energy and tourism sector, thus, significantly increasing its role in the Middle East.²⁶ The Russo-Syrian alliance was formed during the Cold War, and since then, Damascus has been one of Moscow’s ‘remaining geopolitical sites in the Middle East.’ The Republic maintains a naval base at the Port of Tartus - critical because of the larger role it wants to play in the Middle East.²⁷ Al-Assad backed the Russian intervention in Georgia in 2008 – another reason why the Kremlin is not in favour of any military intervention. Throughout the Syrian conflict, Russia has supported the Assad regime at the United Nations (UN) to stall Security Council (SC) resolutions advocating for military intervention.²⁸ ‘Russia seeks to maintain and expand its status as a world power, and views the focused, purposeful export of its military technologies to key countries as a fundamental tool

²⁶ Paul D. Miller, “With Syria Chemical Attack, Another Obama Foreign Policy Deal Fails Hard,” *Hill*, April 13, 2017, <http://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/foreignpolicy/328654-after-syria-chemical-attacks-obama-pack-up-that-foreign>.

²⁷ Dmitri Trenin, “Russia’s Interests in Syria,” *Carnegie Moscow Center*, June 9, 2014, <http://carnegie.ru/2014/06/09/russia-s-interestsin-syria-pub-55831>.

²⁸ Editor’s Note: For example, the October 2011 resolution which advocated a Syrian-led political process and condemned human rights abuses was vetoed by Moscow. Another similar resolution was vetoed in February 2012. While this article was being finalised, Russia again blocked a UN resolution to establish a 30-day ceasefire and humanitarian deliveries to eastern Ghouta which saw one of the bloodiest weeks of aerial bombardment in the civil war that has devastated the country. The UNSC finally approved a resolution on 26 February 2018 for the 30-day ceasefire.

in achieving this.²⁹ The import of arms to Syria from Russia now accounts for some 78 per cent of its total, and during 2007-10, arms exports reached USD 7.4 billion. It is important to point out that Moscow claims that no arms deals have been signed and current weapons deliveries are part of earlier deals, which range from small arms to tanks, heavy munitions, helicopters, and aircrafts.³⁰ Russian firms invested nearly USD 20 billion in Syria in 2009 alone.³¹ With the removal of the governments of Iraq and Libya (2011), the only remaining Russian client state in the region is Syria, making it a significant actor for Putin. The Russians have had strong economic, political, and military links with Syria, and the Putin government has a special interest in this profitable market.³² There are approximately 30,000 people of Russian origin in Syria and al-Assad has cooperated in reducing the influence of the Syrian Chechens in Russia. This also shows a willingness by Russia to remain increasingly involved in the Middle East. Agela Stent has also noted that:

[Russia's] unanticipated military foray into Syria has transformed the civil war there into a proxy US-Russian conflict.³³

The Russians, for the aforementioned reasons, do not want to abandon their last base in the Middle East. The support of Putin for the

²⁹ Stephen Blank and Edward Levitzky, "Geostrategic Aims of the Russian Arms Trade in East Asia and the Middle East," *Defence Studies* 15, no. 1 (2015):63-80, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14702436.2015.1010287>.

³⁰ Lily Anderson, Gil Bar-Sela, Kell Brauer, Alexis Chouery, Rebecca Donato, Melanie Eng, Patrick Gallagher, Trenton Holmberg, Veronica Jimenez, Bryan Lam, Daniel Maggioncalda, Amanda Ramshaw, Anna Rumpf and Annie Wang, *Syria: American Action for a Complex Crisis*, report (Seattle: Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, 2014), 9, http://courses.washington.edu/hrmena/Library_files/Task%20Force%20G%20Syria.pdf.

³¹ Anna Borshchevskaya, "Russia's Many Interests in Syria" (Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2013), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/russias-many-interests-in-syria>.

³² Mohammad Sohrabi, "Russian Foreign Policy in the Middle East," *Political Science and International Relations Journal* 7, no. 25 (2014): 113-144.

³³ Angela Stent, "Putin's Power Play in Syria: How to Respond to Russia's Intervention," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 1 (2016): 106-113.

Assad government against the opposing forces and groups has made an abandoned policy quite active and the continuing presence of the Russian naval forces at Tartus has added to Syria's capability and strength. The government of Putin with its support of the al-Assad regime and its close military cooperation with Iran and the creation of a united front against the Western influence in the Middle East has added to Russia's stature in the region.

The presence of Russian warships in Syrian ports in support of al-Assad, cooperation with Iran in curtailing his opposition, opposition to the UNSC wanting to admonish the Syrian government in response to its alleged use of chemical weapons in 2013 and again in April of 2017 should all be seen as part of its new policy to return as an influential country in the power equation of the Middle East.

At one point during the Syrian crisis, both Russia and Iran believed that it had reached Brecher's third stage and was becoming less critical and would soon reach its last and post-crisis stage. The government victories in Aleppo and other Syrian fronts created an outlook, it appeared as though al-Assad had the upper hand in the negotiations within the framework of the International Syria Support Group chaired by the Russian Federation and the US. In September 2016, this framework process also broke down.³⁴ However:

Moscow did not fail to take advantage of the transition period under the leadership of the United States to seize the initiative and outline its "rules of the game" in Syria. This was the focus of the "triadic initiative" in December 2016 and the subsequent Astana and Geneva negotiations. However, neither Astana talks (to which even Moscow sent low-level delegations), nor those in Geneva, which were convened twice at the insistence of the Russian leadership and was never remembered for anything other than the mysterious "Naumkin document" as well as the de facto ceasefire regime, were turning points.³⁵

³⁴ Leonid M. Issaev, "Can Russia Reach a Consensus on Syria with Trump?" (brief, Alsharq Forum, Istanbul, 2017), http://www.sharqforum.org/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2017/06/Can-Russia-Reach-a-Consensus-on-Syria-with-Trump.pdf.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

With the US Presidential election in 2016 and with the new administration considering a stated policy of non-interference in Syria, there was little expectation of any particular change in the US policy in the Middle East or Syria.³⁶ However, two months after the arrival of Donald Trump at the helm of US affairs, there was a massive change of policy towards Syria. The US administration in a surprise move and in response to the chemical attacks in Khan Sheikhoun in the state of Idlib ordered an attack of nearly 59 cruise missiles on the Syrian airbase in Al-Shayrat.³⁷ The Russian government immediately condemned this attack calling it an open violation on the sovereignty of Syria and international law, and requested an immediate session of the UNSC.³⁸ Russian President Putin further stated that this attack damaged the relations between Moscow and Washington and ordered additional elements of its naval fleet to the Mediterranean.

US Policy towards Syria during the Obama Administration

From the end of the Second World War to the break-up of the Soviet Union, the US foreign policy was based on its fight with communism. This policy involved maintaining its allies in the Middle East and the safe passage of oil from there to international waters. With the break-up of the Soviet Union and liberation of Kuwait by the coalition forces under the US leadership, Washington sought the creation of a unipolar world. The events of September 11 in 2001, defeat of the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 2001 and 2003 respectively, and the US occupation of both countries convinced the Republican administration of George W. Bush that the US was the sole superpower and that it must

³⁶ Dexter Filkins, "Trump and Syria," *New Yorker*, November 10, 2016, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/president-trumps-policy-on-syria>.

³⁷ "United States Strikes Syrian Government Airbase in Response to Chemical Weapons Attacks by Syrian Forces; Two Additional Strikes on Syrian Government Forces Justified by Defense of Troops Rationale," *American Journal of International Law* 111, no. 3 (2017): 781-787.

³⁸ "Syria Missile Strike Condemned by Russia in Firm Warning to US," *ABC News*, April 8, 2017, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-04-08/8427456>.

play the role of a world policeman.³⁹ He believed that by following Hobbes' theory, the US had a responsibility to bring its irregular orbits back to order with force.⁴⁰

However, there arose various problems which stood in the way of this, such as the formation of terrorist groups in the Persian Gulf, the Middle East and other regions. Given the inability of the US to govern in occupation (Iraq and Afghanistan) and its heavy price tag which created problems for its economy, the people demanded a different solution and policy. The entry of Barack Obama in the Presidential race in 2008 with his Senate experience and the slogan of change benefitted from this situation. Most observers agree that the life of a policymaker, his/her education, political experience, the defining experiences in his/her social life, and physical and mental health have a great role in his personal and public choices. Obama, like his predecessors, sought a larger influence of the US politically in the world. However, unlike Bush, Obama believed that the tools of diplomacy are less expensive and can give better results. Accordingly, he was able to work with the European and non-European allies to support the US policies. For example, with respect to the Iran's nuclear programme, he was able to push through several resolutions in the UNSC against Iran, while leaving the door open for diplomacy. As popular uprisings brought the reigns of long-time dictators in Tunisia and Egypt to an end, his administration tried with only lukewarm support of the new rulers to force them to relegate power to their people. The US did, however, in the last stages of the Libyan war interfere in a limited way against Muammar Gaddafi and in support of the people.

The foreign policy of the US in the Syrian crisis was built on the basis of support of the opposition without the use of military intervention. The Obama administration repeatedly asked al-Assad to abdicate power in favour of the populace. As efforts of the regime to crush resistance failed and given the expansion of clashes, entrance of armed *Takfiri/Jihadi*

³⁹ Mohammad Ali Kadivar, "Liberalism and Conservatism in Thomas Hobbes Thoughts," *Political & Economic Ettela'at* 20, nos. 5&6 (2005): 88-89.

⁴⁰ Amir Sajedi, "Geopolitics of the Persian Gulf Security: Iran and the United States," *IPRI Journal* IX, no. 2 (2009): 77-89, <http://www.ipripak.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/art5amis2009.pdf>.

groups in Syria, many believed that the US military would soon make limited moves in order to overthrow al-Assad. In 2012, President Obama established a 'red line' with respect to the use of chemical weapons by the regime in Syria. But, when al-Assad was accused of a Sarin gas attack in August 2013 near Damascus in which 1,500 people were killed, President Obama did not intervene militarily and agreed with Russia to remove chemical weapons from Syria.⁴¹ Not using the military option at that time and handling of the 'red line statement' was near unanimously seen as a failure - the loss of US credibility in the Arab world and in Europe. It has become one of his administration's 'worst blunder.'⁴² It has even been proposed that this decision led to a spiralling of events starting from the downfall of the rulers in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt. Some Islamic groups, radical and moderate, were able to assume power in Tunisia which could have created issues for the West and Israel. Libya (a country where with the help of US forces, the rule of Colonel Gaddafi had come to an end) witnessed an attack on the US Counsel in Benghazi that resulted in the killing of the American Counsel and other diplomats. Islamic forces came to power in Egypt threatening the West; in Syria radical *Jihadi* groups and the liberation forces fought against al-Assad and at times with each other. When in a cruel show of force one of the Syrian opposition rebels cut out the heart of a government soldier in front of a camera and bit into it, one was left asking what kind of government can come to power in Syria after al-Assad. It has been pointed out that:

⁴¹ Pamela Engel, "Obama Reportedly Declined to Enforce Red Line in Syria after Iran Threatened to Back Out of Nuclear Deal," *Business Insider*, August 23, 2016, <http://www.businessinsider.com/obama-red-line-syria-iran-2016-8>; and Michael Crowley, "Obama's 'Red Line' Haunts Clinton, Trump," *POLITICO*, October 11, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/09/obama-clinton-syria-red-line-228585>;

⁴² Derek Chollet, "Obama's Red Line, Revisited," *POLITICO*, July 19, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/07/obama-syria-foreign-policy-red-line-revisited-214059>.

Norms like the prohibition on the use of chemical weapons are not self-enforcing. They require a superpower like America to deter other dictators from future violations. When the US abdicates its responsibility to make good on its red line on chemical weapons, it invites mischief from rogues all over the world.⁴³

New US Policy towards the Syrian Crisis

Considering the support of Barack Obama to his former Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, as a Presidential candidate in 2016, it seemed that with her election, the US foreign policy would remain as before in relation to the Syrian crisis. However, the entry of a successful businessman, albeit with personally offensive manners and no previous political background nor executive experience, as a contender for the Republican nomination, amazed many. This was even more so as he led the pack of other contenders. The manner in which Donald Trump carried on his election campaign and his populist speeches concerned many politicians. Senior members of the Republican Party even criticised him during the election or kept their distance from him. However, the outcome of this election was at odds with political opinions and polls as most predicted a democratic win. Trump's decade-long experience as a 'showman', his populist speeches and the unique US election process (the Electoral College) won him the White House, but not the popular vote advantage in which Hillary Clinton led by several million.⁴⁴ Trump had disregarded interference in Syria and did not ask for the removal of al-Assad during his campaign. Even after two months of his Presidency, the US diplomats at the UN passed on any military interference in Syria and sought discussions and talks with al-Assad and his opposition. The new administration wanted a provisional government without further destruction of the underlying military and security structures. This was so

⁴³ Eli Lake, "Thank Trump for Enforcing Obama's 'Red Line' in Syria," *Bloomberg*, April 7, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2017-04-07/thank-trump-for-enforcing-obama-s-red-line-in-syria>.

⁴⁴ "Clinton Lost the Presidential Race Despite Larger Number of Voters," *Pars Today*, 2016, www.Parstoday.com/fa/Europe_and_ammerica-i24157.

that the *Jihadists* could not use the weakened military and security-related structure of Syria in a war-torn country.

The use of chemical weapons on April 7, 2017 at Khan Sheikhoun led to a major tactical change by the US President in handling of the Syrian crisis.⁴⁵ Many states, including Iran and Russia, immediately condemned the chemical attack and asked for an investigation so that the perpetrators could be punished according to international law.⁴⁶ However, without any investigation, most Arab states accused the Syrian Army commanded by al-Assad and made his government responsible for the chemical attack. The US, along with most Arab governments, claimed that the chemical attack had been advanced by air and that only the Russian and the Syrian governments had that capability and previous history. The Trump administration only three days later unleashed no less than 59 Tomahawks from the USS Porter and USS Ross at the Syrian airbase in the outskirts of the city of Homs which destroyed parts of this base and left eight dead.⁴⁷

The election promise of Trump to increase US power in the world was based on economic grounds. However, he tried, along with increasing economic influence and with threats of using military force in the Syrian crisis, display the military power and re-new the era of US unilateral moves in troubled regions of the world such as the Middle East. This surprise attack was welcomed by some of the governments allied to the US and Arab and non-Arab governments in the Middle East that were opposed to Obama's nuclear Iranian policy. However, as discussed earlier, this soured relations between Moscow and Washington.⁴⁸ The attack also did not have the consent of the UNSC.

Professor Patrick M. Morgan in his analysis has said that international politics are in the end made by people who are in a position of influence in world affairs. One, therefore, needs to conduct a personal

⁴⁵ Zack Beauchamp, "Trump's Response to an Atrocity in Syria: Talk Tough and Blame Obama," *Vox*, April 5, 2017, <http://www.vox.com/world/2017/4/5/15189820>.

⁴⁶ "Iran Condemned Missile Attack on Syrian Air Base," *Alef.ir*, 2017.

⁴⁷ "Why America Attacked Syria?" *donya-e-eqtasad.com*, 2017, www.donya-e-eqtasad.com.

⁴⁸ "U.S. Missile Attack on Syria," *Tabnak*, May 7, 2017, <http://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/691685>.

analysis of the behaviour and modes of thought of those who are decision-makers such as presidents, prime ministers and their close advisors.⁴⁹ Most administrations either continue the policy of their predecessor or through long deliberations frame a new policy. This was particularly true of the new Obama administration in 2008 as described in its treatment of the Iraq war. The Trump administration has, in fact, done neither and has relied on its decisions which are seemingly rash. It is the conclusion of this paper that Trump's personal thoughts and feelings are to be noted as much as a consensus formed by the administration at the highest levels.

Some social scientists believe that approach to decision-making should be one that closely resembles economic and business management methods. This presumes the existence of personal clear thinking and access to all existing knowledge and a clear evaluation of the repercussions of all possible moves. This allows a clear and free choice in one's priorities, whereby decision-makers can act firmly and definitely according to their priorities. However, the process of decision-making leading to an appropriate result presupposes that instead of relying only on personal priorities, one makes use of organisational rules, common organisational experience relating to a particular period, and the given information received through related organisations, in order to arrive at the final decision.⁵⁰

In contrast to other politicians, the decisions taken by Donald Trump in Syria, a real estate mogul-turned-president, have been unpredictable and vaguely logical, especially since at one point he had even offered tacit support for al-Assad,⁵¹ and on more than one occasion told Obama to 'not attack Syria' via Twitter and accused him of being the 'founder of ISIS' over covert support for rebel groups, and who, since then has made the US deeply involved in this complex international war

⁴⁹ Seyed Hossein Seifzadeh, *Different Concepts in International Relations* (Tehran: Nasher Sefid, 1992), 29-30.

⁵⁰ James E. Dougherty and Robert L. Pfaltzgraff, Jr., *Contending Theories of International Relations: A Comprehensive Survey*, trans. Vahid Bozorgi and Alireza Tayyeb (Tehran: Ghomes Publisher, 1993), 725-30.

⁵¹ Tom O'Connor, "War in Syria: U.S. Will no longer Target Assad," *Newsweek*, March 30, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/us-war-syria-stops-focus-assad-removal-crisis-mideast-576984>.

zone.⁵² There has even been speculation that Trump was influenced by his daughter Ivanka, who was affected by the horrendous scenes of the chemical attacks in Syria, in his decision to attack the Syrian airbase.⁵³ This, followed by comments of the US Commerce Secretary that the cruise missile attack was merely 'after-dinner entertainment' for guests dining at Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago club on April 6, 2017 when the President decided to launch the strike.⁵⁴

Trump, after the missile strike and in another obvious turn, stated that the US priorities are not regime change in Syria, but the fight against radical Islamic and *Jihadi* forces. It would not be a surprise if Trump changes his mind, *again*, because even though:

Foreign policy 'doctrines' are overrated — being able to reduce your policy to a bumper sticker-sized slogan doesn't mean that it's any wiser or more effective than one that can't be described so succinctly. But it does help to have some guiding principles that help everyone — your own government, Congress, both allies and adversaries overseas — understand what you're trying to achieve. And it doesn't appear that there's much of a structure underlying U.S. policy, beyond whatever President Trump thinks of what he saw on cable news that day.⁵⁵

⁵² Tom O'Connor, "Trump's War: From Bombing Syria to Challenging Russia and Iran," *Newsweek*, June 27, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/trump-war-bombing-syria-challenge-russia-iran-629526>.

⁵³ Kate Brannen, "Did Trump Bomb Syria because Ivanka Told him to?" *Newsweek*, April 12, 2017; Simon Johnson, "Ivanka Trump Influenced my Father to Launch Syria Strikes, Reveals Brother Eric," *Telegraph*, April 11, 2017; and Zachary Cohen, "Eric Trump: Ivanka Influenced Syria Strike Decision," *CNN.com*, April 11, 2017.

⁵⁴ Lauren Gambino, "Trump's Attack on Syria was 'After-dinner Entertainment' says US Commerce Secretary," *Guardian*, May 2, 2017 <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/may/02/trumps-attack-on-syria-after-dinner-entertainment-wilbur-ross-commerce-secretary>.

⁵⁵ Paul Waldman, "Six Questions about Trump's Missile Attack in Syria," *Washington Post*, April 10, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/plum-line/wp/2017/04/10/six-questions-about-trumps-missile-attack-in-syria/?utm_term=.908ff4a3b855.

Conclusion

The Syrian crisis is on a long, complex and difficult road owing to the involvement of internal and external players. At the start of the crisis, many Western and Arab governments believed that the Assad regime will fall in a short time. Most governments, assured of the continuing support for the internal opposition to al-Assad, demanded his removal from power. However, the resistance of his regime which became possible with the support of his allies in Iran and Hezbollah and later with large Russian military aid has kept him from being removed. With the passage of time and the entry of *Jihadi* and *Takfiri* forces in Syria and the destruction brought on by the Islamic State and considering a lack of an adequate alternative to al-Assad, the West has also become less desirous of his removal. The role of Russia with its logistical and air support has made this crisis far more complex. The Obama policy did not call for military intervention in Syria and sought a diplomatic solution involving negotiations among the various parties. Even when al-Assad crossed the 'red line' for the supposedly first time and used chemical weapons, there was no military response, instead the US cooperated with Russia in removing 1,300 tonnes of chemical weapons.⁵⁶

There were important reasons for Obama to choose the path of 'coercive diplomacy.' After his eight years at the helm, he believed diplomacy to be a more effective and less costly tool.⁵⁷ He was aware of how much hatred the militaristic nature of the Bush Presidency and its unilateral approach had created among many war-torn Muslim states for the US foreign policy. Obama had gone to the White House with a call for a change of policy. The bitter feelings about the US presence in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the killing the US Counsel and other diplomats in Benghazi (Libya) caused Obama to rely more on the policy of economic sanctions and use of diplomacy. The achievement of an understanding with Iran on the nuclear issue and the establishment of diplomatic relations with Havana (Cuba) after half a decade are testament to that fact.

⁵⁶ Chollet, "Obama's Red Line, Revisited."

⁵⁷ Ibid.

Trump assumed power with his peculiarities, crude behaviour, lack of any political experience, and (known by many) his exuberance. His election sloganeering, advertisements and interaction with the media made many think that his domestic and foreign policies would be in contrast to his predecessor. Not only this, his decisions are certainly affected by what the majority of his conservative-leaning voters want. After the end of his first 100 days, many, including his own party members noted the lack of clarity and forthrightness in his policies along with the contradictions regarding terrorism, immigration and climate change etc.⁵⁸

The attack ordered by Trump on Syria showed him to be an opportunist preoccupied with power and one who wants to return the US to the policies of aggression pursued unilaterally after the Cold War. From the missile attack on Syria without consulting Congress or the UN to sending navy ships to the waters off the Korean Peninsula and using the mother of all bombs in Afghanistan, one sees decisions arising out of inexperience and lack of counsel. The UN has been pursuing peace through a political framework composed of talks leading to a transition out of the Syrian crisis. These efforts were taking place between the representatives of opposition groups and Assad's regime in Geneva and Astana and according to Resolution 2268 of the UNSC.⁵⁹ These talks although so far ineffectual had raised hopes of further rounds of negotiations among the participants with the aim of ending the Syrian crisis. However, the US missile attack, which rose out of Trump's unusual behavior, did not aid these efforts, rather re-energized the opposition to al-Assad and made these discussions and the Syrian crisis more difficult. ■

⁵⁸ Michael Wolfe's, *Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 2018).

⁵⁹ United Nations, "Security Council Endorses Syria Cessation of Hostilities Accord, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2268 (2016)," press coverage, February 26, 2016, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2016/sc12261.doc.htm>.