

The Syrian Conflict: A Turning Point in US Middle East Policy

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The Syrian conflict represents a significant turning point in American policy toward the Middle East. The past decade has seen the United States downgrade the region on its list of priorities, and Syria has in many ways been a bellwether of US engagement in the Middle East. Arab states have recently normalized with the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad.¹ They are accepting—pragmatically—that he has managed to remain in power despite the war. This acceptance is driven in no small part by US foreign policy toward Syria since 2011.

Linked to this is what many Arab countries see as a problematic American take on Iran’s interventions in the Middle East. Despite the different priorities of successive US administrations since 2008, the Iran focus since former President Barack Obama’s first term has been on the Islamic Republic’s nuclear program rather than its regional role. Some Arab countries now going down the path of normalization with Assad are

1 Mohamed Wagdy and Kareem Chehayeb, “Pariah No More? Arab League Reinstates Bashar Assad’s Syria,” *Associated Press*, May 7, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/syria-arab-egypt-saudi-qatar-jordan-f0298c40488470eb28274b2ffb859396>.

driven by the desire to de-escalate tensions in the region after waiting for years for US support vis-à-vis Iran's interventions in the Middle East—support that never came.

Assad is enjoying the legitimacy that normalization with Arab countries brings. Full normalization in the Arab world would signal the beginning of the end of international isolation for the regime, even if the end goal is still a way off. Understanding how Syria got here merits looking back at how the United States has approached the main milestones in the Syrian conflict since its beginning. This chapter lays out the key policy decisions taken by the United States at each of those milestones to argue that America has been the main driver behind the dynamics leading Arab countries to normalize with Assad.

Iran and US Nonintervention in Syria

With signing a nuclear deal with Iran having been the main Middle East priority for the US administration during Obama's first term, the American position toward the Syrian conflict in its first two years was noninterventionist.² When the Syrian uprising began in March 2011, Syrians had seen the Obama administration express support for the revolutions that had begun earlier in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. The Libyan context, with the violent crackdown by the Muammar Qaddafi regime on peaceful demonstrations leading to UN Security Council Resolution 1973 authorizing a NATO-led military campaign to help remove Qaddafi from power, stood out as an illustration of the international community's solidarity with movements for political change in the Arab world.³ Pro-reform activists across the region saw the US as a leading player in this context. Though the Syrian uprising started as a peaceful one, the implicit expectation in the Arab world was that the United States would not hesitate to use all available tools to aid the Syrians demanding freedom and dignity.

It took little time for the Syrian uprising to turn into a conflict due to the violent crackdown on protesters by the Assad regime. The US made statements condemning the violence and imposed some sanctions on the

2 Barbara Plett Usher, "Obama's Syria Legacy: Measured Diplomacy, Strategic Explosion," *BBC News*, January 13, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-38297343>.

3 United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973 (2011), March 17, 2011, <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/s/res/1973-%282011%29>.

regime, and by August 2011 had called on Assad to resign.⁴ But Washington did not invest in serious diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict. Running parallel to this was Iran's intervention in the Syrian scenario, which began early on as both Iran and its Lebanese ally Hezbollah played an active role in advising the Assad regime on quelling protests.⁵ US policymakers knew of Hezbollah and Iran's role but did not initiate stepped-up diplomatic action on Syria.⁶

The main factor behind the United States' reluctance to engage further in this regard was Iran's nuclear file. While campaigning for his first term, Obama made sealing a nuclear deal with Iran his priority for the Middle East, and he pursued this goal during both of his presidential terms. In 2011, the goal was still a long way from being achieved. The Obama administration did not want to further complicate its relationship with the Islamic Republic by adding another variable, namely Iran's regional interventions, to the negotiating table as part of a "grand bargain."⁷ Instead, it decided to focus only on the nuclear deal. This left Iran and Hezbollah with a wide-open space to increase their activities inside Syria to aid the Assad regime.

Obama's Red Line

"Assad must go"; no other words better summarize the Obama administration's rhetoric on the Arab Spring. When President Obama uttered these words during a press conference on March 20, 2013—adding that Assad and his regime "will be held accountable for the use of chemical weapons or their transfer to terrorists"—he implied that after two years of the Syrian crisis, the US was finally ready to act to effect regime change in

4 Scott Wilson and Joby Warrick, "Assad Must Go, Obama Says," *Washington Post*, August 18, 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/assad-must-go-obama-says/2011/08/18/gIQAelheOJ_story.html.

5 Ian Black and Dan Roberts, "Hezbollah Is Helping Assad Fight Syria Uprising, Says Hassan Nasrallah," *The Guardian*, April 30, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/30/hezbollah-syria-uprising-nasrallah>.

6 Mark Hosenball, "Iran Helping Assad to Put Down Protests: Officials," *Reuters*, March 23, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-syria-crackdown-idUSBRE82M18220120323>.

7 Michael R. Gordon, "John Kerry, in Saudi Arabia, Reassures Gulf States on Iran Nuclear Talks," *New York Times* March 5, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/06/world/middleeast/john-kerry-in-saudi-arabia-reassures-gulf-states-on-iran-nuclear-talks.html>.

Syria.⁸ This was especially poignant, as the press conference during which Obama made the remarks was a joint one with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu while the US president was in Israel on an official visit. The reality is that the US position on Syria at the time remained hostage to the Iran nuclear file. The Obama administration's rhetoric on the Arab Spring in general, and on Syria in particular, was mainly one of false hope.

Obama's words in March 2013 came the day after the Syrian regime launched two chemical weapon attacks in Aleppo and Damascus.⁹ In his remarks, Obama said that the use of chemical weapons was a "game changer" and a "red line."¹⁰ When the Assad regime continued to use chemical weapons later that summer, Assad's allies and opponents alike, as well as those within the regime itself, expected that the US was going to engage in military action in Syria. But such action never took place, partly due to continued concerns in Washington that addressing Iran's regional interventions would risk progress toward signing a nuclear deal, in addition to hesitation regarding both who would replace Assad and the challenge of stabilizing Syria.

Obama's red line in the sand was a pivotal moment for US foreign policy. Assad understood it as an illustration that the United States was not serious about removing him from power. Iran and Hezbollah joined Assad in seeing the last-minute change of mind in Washington as further proof of US weakness. But above all else, the United States' inaction frustrated its allies in the Arab world, particularly in the Gulf. Qatar and Saudi Arabia had thrown their weight behind various elements of Syria's opposition and its rebel factions and saw in the backtracking a significant blow to their efforts.¹¹ US credibility—in the eyes of America's friends and enemies alike—was damaged. Saudi Arabia and Israel were both unhappy with Obama's pursuit of the Iran nuclear deal at the expense of their own

8 "Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel in Joint Press Conference," The White House Office of the Press Secretary, March 20, 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/03/20/remarks-president-obama-and-prime-minister-netanyahu-israel-joint-press->

9 "Timeline of Syrian Chemical Weapons Activity, 2012-2022," Arms Control Association, May 2021, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Timeline-of-Syrian-Chemical-Weapons-Activity>.

10 "Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel."

11 "Qatar's Emir, a U.S. Ally, Assails Obama's Syria Policy," *Reuters*, September 20, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-qatar-idUSKCN11Q2RX>.

national political and security interests. Obama's much coveted nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), was eventually adopted in October 2015 and implemented in January 2016.¹²

The Rise of IS and the Empowerment of Iran-Backed Groups

If US foreign policy toward the Middle East during the first three years of the Syrian conflict was dominated by the objective of securing a nuclear deal with Iran, the next three years were dominated by the fight against the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), now known as the Islamic State (IS). The US focus on countering IS had fundamental long-term consequences for actors in the Syrian conflict. It not only resulted in the empowerment of Kurdish factions in northeast Syria but also in the consolidation of power for Iran-backed armed groups that were also fighting IS in Syria and Iraq. This, in turn, further strengthened Iran's influence in the two countries and beyond.

In Syria and Lebanon, Hezbollah used the fight against IS to paint its intervention in support of the Assad regime as being about countering what it labeled "takfiri jihadists," saying that its actions were protecting Lebanon and the rest of the Arab world from the spread of IS and other Sunni extremist groups.¹³ In Iraq, the Iran-backed Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) presented itself as the national liberation force needed to defeat IS, especially as the Iraqi Army had failed to stand up to it on its own when it took over Mosul in 2014 and declared the establishment of its so-called caliphate.¹⁴

Both Hezbollah and the PMF eventually cashed in their military gains in the form of political advantages, consolidating their positions as the dominant political actors in their respective countries.¹⁵ Both continue to promote an

12 Jennifer R. Williams, "A Comprehensive Timeline of the Iran Nuclear Deal," Brookings Institution, July 21, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2015/07/21/a-comprehensive-timeline-of-the-iran-nuclear-deal/>.

13 Nour Samaha, "Hezbollah Chief Urges Middle East to Unite against ISIL," *Al Jazeera*, February 16, 2015, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/2/16/hezbollah-chief-urges-middle-east-to-unite-against-isil>.

14 Ned Parker et al., "Special Report: How Mosul Fell - An Iraqi General Disputes Baghdad's Story," *Reuters*, October 14, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-gharawi-special-report/special-report-how-mosul-fell-an-iraqi-general-disputes-baghdads-story-idUSKCN0I30Z820141014>.

15 Farah Najjar, "Iraq's Second Army: Who Are They, What Do They Want?," *Al Jazeera*, October 31, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/31/iraqs-second-army-who-are-they-what-do-they-want>.

anti-US agenda and have used their political clout to either block opponents from reaching positions of power or to limit their influence if they do reach such positions. In both countries, these Iran-backed groups have played a major role in stalling processes of cabinet formation following parliamentary elections.¹⁶ Meanwhile, Iran consolidated its presence in Syria through the expansion of Shia shrines under its supervision, the buying of property, and demographic engineering in key areas near the Lebanese border through population transfers.¹⁷ The latter practice served to give Hezbollah and its Syrian allies de facto control over the Lebanon-Syria border, which in turn has facilitated their movement of goods and people between the two countries in both directions, including the illicit trade in drugs.¹⁸ Working in partnership with the Fourth Armored Division of the Syrian Army, which is led by Bashar al-Assad's brother, Maher al-Assad, Hezbollah is playing a major role in making Syria an international hub for the Captagon drug trade.¹⁹

The Instrumentalization of Syrian Kurdish Factions

As the United States gathered and led a global coalition to fight IS, Kurdish factions were the coalition's chosen local forces on the ground in northeast Syria, though their name, the Syrian Democratic Forces, was meant to convey that they were not exclusively Kurdish but also had Arabs in their ranks. One military member of the global coalition said in 2017 that the coalition preferred to work with Kurdish groups because, "Arab Sunni groups are too divided, whereas the Kurds are more ideologically coherent and therefore easier to command."²⁰

16 Philip Loft, "Iraq in 2022: Forming a Government," UK Parliament House of Commons Library, November 2, 2022, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9605/>.

17 Martin Chulov, "Iran Repopulates Syria with Shia Muslims to Help Tighten Regime's Control," *The Guardian*, January 13, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/13/irans-syria-project-pushing-population-shifts-to-increase-influence>.

18 Mazen Ezzi, "Lebanese Hezbollah's Experience in Syria," *Middle East Directions*, March 13, 2020, https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/66546/MED_WPCS_2020_4.pdf.

19 Rouba El Hussein and Jean Marc Mojon, "Captagon Connection: How Syria Became a Narco State," *Al-Monitor*, November 2, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/11/captagon-connection-how-syria-became-narco-state>.

20 Interview with the author, June 2017.

Kurdish factions saw a double gain in joining the fight against IS; it was a way to both liberate their areas from the organization's control and obtain political favors from the United States. The latter goal was important because Kurdish groups, especially the People's Protection Units (YPG) and Women's Protection Units (YPJ), saw an alliance with the US as helping their objective of gaining autonomy. Turkey had entered the Syrian conflict to support groups from the Syrian opposition against Assad, but used this support as a pretext for trying to prevent Kurdish groups in Syria from establishing a Kurdish-governed region near its border, citing the YPG's relationship with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)—which Turkey lists as a terrorist group—as proof that the former are terrorists. Ironically, the United States also recognizes the PKK as a terrorist group.

The presence of oil fields in Syrian areas where Kurdish factions prevail is a motivation for the United States to continue to have a presence in those areas because Washington will not want Assad to regain control over those resources. The United States can also instrumentalize Kurdish factions in standoffs with Turkey. But it would be a stretch to see the US partnership with the Kurds in Syria as a long-term political alliance. It is more of a relationship of convenience. Kurdish factions have periodically signaled their willingness to strike a deal with Assad whenever they saw that the direction of the conflict was heading toward his remaining in power. This trend is reinforced by the gradual restoration of bilateral ties between Syria and other Arab countries.²¹

The Rise of Russia

The overall approach of the United States to the Syrian conflict during its first four years paved the way for Russia to enter militarily in September 2015 in support of the Assad regime. As the above overview shows, with the US mainly throwing its weight behind the fight against IS rather than supporting the opposition against Assad, Russia saw in the United States' disengagement from the Syrian conflict an opportunity to assert its geopolitical weight—namely against the United States—at a relatively low cost. Although Russia provided airpower, it deployed limited troops on the ground, relying on Iran-backed groups to perform that role. Russia also used its support for Assad to consolidate its presence on the Mediterranean

21 Amberin Zaman, "Syria's Kurds Make Their Own Pitch as Arab States Court Assad," *Al-Monitor*, April 20, 2023, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/04/syrias-kurds-make-their-own-pitch-arab-states-court-assad>.

Sea through its naval base in Tartus, in addition to controlling an air base in Humaymin.²²

Russia's intervention in the Syrian conflict came at a time when, despite Iran's backing, the Assad regime was under significant pressure from Syrian rebel groups. The Russian intervention can therefore be seen as having provided Assad with a crucial lifeline. The Obama administration hoped that the nuclear deal with Iran would serve to build some trust that could later be harnessed to address other issues like Iran's ballistic missile program and its regional interventions, but the nuclear deal had no bearing on Iran's behavior on either front.²³

Russia later used its military might to present itself as a power broker, launching the Astana Process with Iran and Turkey in 2017 under the pretext of seeking a peace settlement.²⁴ The Astana Process came after years of the political process led by the United Nations, which aimed to achieve political transition in Syria according to UN Security Council Resolution 2254, having failed to yield major results, mainly because Assad and Russia deliberately sought to render UN efforts ineffective.²⁵

Although the United States continued to paint Iran and Russia as destabilizing actors in the Middle East, successive administrations in Washington chose not to engage Russia bilaterally to try to reach a deal on Syria; nor did the US change course regarding Iran's regional interventions. Under the Trump administration, the US announced a "maximum pressure" policy on Iran, but said policy was limited to increasing sanctions on Iran (and Russia) in 2017, withdrawing from the JCPOA in 2018, and assassinating Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps leader Qassem Soleimani in Iraq in 2020.²⁶

Russia and Iran, meanwhile, continued their military alliance in Syria, using it to project power vis-à-vis the West in general and the United States in particular. They helped one another in evading sanctions, with

22 Yuliya Talmazan, "Russia Establishing Permanent Presence at Its Syrian Bases: Minister of Defence," *NBC News*, December 26, 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/russia-establishing-permanent-presence-its-syrian-bases-minister-defense-n832596>.

23 Based on interviews conducted by the author with US State Department personnel, April 2021.

24 "Syria: The Astana Peace Process," *France 24*, May 9, 2018, <https://www.france24.com/en/20180905-syria-astana-peace-process>.

25 United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015), adopted December 18, 2015, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2254.pdf.

26 Colum Lynch, "Iran: Maximum Pressure, Minimum Gain," *Foreign Policy*, December 23, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/12/23/iran-maximum-pressure-trump-policy/>.

Iran facilitating Russia's access to the global economy through trade routes across the Middle East, especially for the trade of oil.²⁷ They both maintained economic relations with various Middle Eastern countries, including countries with which each had political disagreements, such as US allies and partners Turkey and the United Arab Emirates.

Accountability Replaces Diplomacy

The Joe Biden administration has continued on a path of US disengagement in Syria that is similar to those of the administrations of Obama and Trump. When Biden took office, the Middle East in general did not feature highly on the list of US foreign policy priorities, being overshadowed by concerns about China and Russia.²⁸ The exception was the JCPOA, which Biden wanted the US to rejoin. On Syria, Biden appeared to largely follow in the footsteps of Obama, but without the former president's rhetoric. He even appointed some former Obama administration officials to serve in the National Security Council and other government bodies.

Iran came to indirectly benefit from this increased US disengagement. Among other issues, Biden's criticism of Saudi Arabia while on the campaign trail, as well as his desire to resurrect the nuclear deal with Iran, contributed to frosty relations with the kingdom. This also encouraged other US partners in the Arab world to pursue their own diplomatic deals to try to de-escalate regional tensions—such as the China-brokered rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran in March 2023—in order to protect their national security.²⁹ Such moves served to signal to the United States that its own Arab partners are willing to keep all options open if America is not going to increase the extent of its engagement in the region to support their national interests.³⁰

27 Matthew Karnitschnig, "Iran Teaches Russia Its Tricks on Beating Oil Sanctions," *Politico*, November 9, 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/iran-russia-cooperation-dodging-oil-sanctions/>.

28 Joseph Stepansky, "US Foreign Policy in 2021: Key Moments in Biden's First Term," *Al Jazeera*, December 24, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/24/us-foreign-policy-in-2021-key-moments-in-bidens-first-term>.

29 Peter Baker, "Chinese-Brokered Deal Upends Mideast Diplomacy and Challenges U.S.," *New York Times*, March 11, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/11/us/politics/saudi-arabia-iran-china-biden.html>.

30 Lina Khatib, "Saudi Arabia, Iran and China Offer the U.S. a Lesson in Pragmatism," *World Politics Review*, March 14, 2023, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/saudi-arabia-iran-relations-yemen-war-china-us/>.

Syria began to fade into the background as a foreign policy agenda item. The United States and the European Union kept insisting that reconstruction funds would only flow into Syria in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2254 and that they remain committed to a Syrian-led political transition in the country.³¹ They both maintained the sanctions on the Syrian regime that they had implemented and added to throughout the duration of the conflict. The Biden administration continues to uphold the Caesar Act—legislation sanctioning the Assad regime for war crimes—which the 116th Congress passed in December 2019, and which the Trump administration began implementing in 2020.³²

While measures of accountability are important in the Syrian context, they are not a replacement for diplomacy. Sanctions alone are not a sufficient tool for exerting political pressure. Although the Assad regime's financial and diplomatic status was damaged as a result of western sanctions, the regime, with Iran and Russia's help, continues to survive, and has found an important lifeline in illicit trade. As Assad has now regained control of most of Syria, and as Syrian rebel groups have found themselves with less foreign support than before, it is safe to conclude that Russia, China, Iran, and Arab countries all regard the US role in Syria as diminished. One of the starkest contradictions in US policy is that Washington's concern about Russia did not seem to extend to the country's activities in Syria, where it continued to act with impunity. This contributed in a meaningful way to emboldening Russia in its subsequent invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The Route to Peace in Syria Passes Through Washington

Russia, Iran, Turkey, and other Middle Eastern actors have all been pursuing geopolitical interests based on pragmatism and the compartmentalization of economic, military, and political relationships instead of adhering to clear political camps. US disengagement in Syria has contributed to this ongoing dynamic. It is therefore not surprising that many Arab countries are heading in the direction of normalization with Assad. It is unlikely

31 “No Normalization for Syria without ‘Permanent Political Change’: Washington,” *The Cradle*, April 27, 2023, <https://thecradle.co/article-view/24102/no-normalization-for-syria-without-permanent-political-change-washington>.

32 U.S. Congress, House, *Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019*, H.R.31, 116th Congress, 1st sess., introduced in House January 3, 2019, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/31>.

that re-engaging Assad means that any Arab country is going to fund reconstruction in Syria in a major way or trust the Assad regime. Serious contentious issues remain unresolved, mainly the matter of the thousands of detainees held by the regime, Syria's heavy involvement in the international drug trade, the status of millions of Syrian refugees and internally displaced persons, and the presence of Iran-backed militias in Syria.

The Assad regime wanted to return to the Arab League without conditions, and appears to have succeeded in doing so, having been reinstated on May 7, 2023, despite objections from Qatar and other member states.³³ But with US elections looming in 2024, some Arab countries like Saudi Arabia remain keen to see a new US administration that is more engaged in the region in ways that serve their political and security interests. Meanwhile, the UN Syria peace process is stalled indefinitely. What is clear is that the route to peace in Syria still passes through Washington, at least in part. US inaction and disengagement are just as consequential as engagement, and as the Russian intervention in Ukraine shows, the consequences of inaction in the Middle East can stretch far beyond the region itself.

33 Aidan Lewis and Sarah El Safety, "Arab League Readmits Syria as Relations with Assad Normalise," *Reuters*, May 7, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/arab-league-set-readmit-syria-relations-with-assad-normalise-2023-05-07/>.