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U.S. Ideology and the Syrian Civil War

Since the end of World War II, the United States of America has led global intervention efforts for prosperity, stability, and democracy, championing a liberal ideology (Curran 1). Liberalism refers to the political ideology that is based in moral judgement, and argues that guaranteeing life, liberty, and property to individuals in a society is the highest goal of the government (Meiser). Liberalism favors democracy, freedom, and collective decision making above all else, and opposes tyranny, oppression, and war (Meiser). The U.S. has used a liberal ideology to justify interventions in favor of democracy all over the world. Therefore, the United States's decision not to stage a formal intervention in Syria raises questions about the ways that the U.S. may be moving away from this liberal ideology. This paper will examine the political history of Syria, provide an overview of the Syrian civil war, analyze U.S. foreign policy regarding Syria and the Middle East, and compare U.S. presidents who supervised foreign policy decisions. Through examining these aspects of the U.S. and the Syrian conflict, it can be determined that the U.S. has favored a realist approach in regards to intervention in Syria.

Political History of Syria

In 2011, demonstrators took to the streets of Syria as part of a wave of pro-democracy sentiment, demanding social and political change. These kinds of protests, taking place across northern Africa and the Middle East, are known as the Arab Spring. Though a few countries

managed some kind of success with these kinds of protests, Syria descended into a civil war which continues to this day.

There have been five identifiable phases of conflict in Syria since the start of the protests in 2011 (Adams 6). Firstly, small student protests started in Deraa and grew to include a diverse population of Syrians, and protesters were met with armed government forces. Protesters were shot and political opponents were detained, and by May of that year, approximately 850 Syrians had been killed (Adams 6). As the year continued, civilians and defectors from the Syrian army began joining together to form the Free Syrian Army (FSA), defining the second phase of the conflict. The group was officially formed in July 2011 as an umbrella opposition army whose aim was to remove Bashir Al-Assad from power. The force of this opposition and the resilience of protesters was so surprising that the government was forced to change its strategy (Adams 6).

In the third phase, beginning in 2012, brutal military violence turned against not only protesters, but entire cities controlled by the opposition. Homs, a city of over 600,000 people, was surrounded and bombarded by the Syrian government because it was a stronghold of the opposition (Adams 6). Helicopters were used more regularly to bomb citizens from above. Through April and May of 2012, the air attacks started slowly, but picked up in frequency through June and eventually reaching 70 in July (O'Bagy). However, after the third double veto, air strikes grew to 110 in the month of August. The government turned to bombing neighborhoods and popular gathering places for the opposition, adopting a policy of collective punishment (Solvang and Neistat). Civilians became frequent targets of attacks. By this time, armed rebels had acquired land outside of Aleppo and Damascus, and the International

Committee of the Red Cross acknowledged in May that Syria was in the midst of a full civil war (Adams 6).

The fourth phase of the conflict, according to Adams, was characterized by a stalemate between the government and the opposition in 2013. “Both sides controlled considerable territory, but neither could impose a comprehensive military defeat upon the other” (6). The government relied on supplies from Russia, while the opposition relied on foreign money. However, foreign money only fueled the influx of foreign fighters, which in turn contributed to the growth of extremist Islamic rebel militias (Adams 7). To complicate the matter, the United States started air operations in 2014 in order to combat ISIS, the Islamic State insurgency/guerilla group that grew and thrived during this time. In 2015, Russia entered the conflict on Assad’s side by sending troops to counter the opposition.

As the civil war escalated and the death toll rose, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) failed to decide to intervene due to vetos from both Russia and China. Ceasefires were formed in September and December 2016, but have not held, which signals that international policies are not likely to succeed in the future. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights estimates that the death toll in Syria could be as high as 511,000 as of March 2018 (Roth), 6.6 million people displaced internally, and created more than 5.6 million refugees around the world, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR estimate).

Syria is an atypical political case because Assad’s regime is relatively stable due to support from Syrian minorities. There is strong external support on all sides of the conflict from Russia, Iran, Iraq, the United States, Britain, France, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Jordan, and others. Additionally, even though several groups form the

opposition in Syria, local opposition has not joined with foreign jihadists (Ruhayem 8). The opposition movement has no unifying leader, which leaves local players fragmented.

Syria's civil war now includes so many people and nations, and has become so large and complicated, that it threatens the entire Middle East (Adams 7). In Lebanon, Hezbollah (fighters support of the Syrian government) and opposition fighters "have conducted assassinations and deployed deadly car bombs against one another" (Adams 7). Lebanon and Iraq may become extensions of the Syrian battlefield, as ISIL grows with foreign fighters. Surrounding countries such as Jordan feel the impact of refugees, with nearly half a million living inside Jordan, a country with just 6.5 million people (UNHCR estimate).

US Foreign Policy in the Middle East and Syria

On August 18, 2011, President Obama of the United States said that "the future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al-Assad is standing in their way... For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside" (Obama 2011). Instead of making sweeping promises of U.S. intervention as he did in Libya, Obama went on to say "the United States cannot and will not impose this transition upon Syria" (Obama 2011). This message is in stark contrast to his words regarding Libya, which was similarly in the trenches of government crackdown during Arab Spring protests. He justified his decision to intervene in Libya by saying, "as president, I refused to wait for the images of slaughter and mass graves before taking action" (Obama 2011). If Obama had used this same logic for intervention in Syria, the U.S. would have had boots on the ground in 2011 after government forces had killed the first 850 Syrians. At worst, the U.S. military could have waited for the government siege of Homs in 2012. Additionally, in regards to intervention in Libya, Obama

said “left unaddressed, the growing instability in Libya could ignite wider instability in the Middle East, with dangerous consequences to the national security interests of the United States” (Obama 2011). Certainly growing instability was a concern in Syria, too. Why was it less of a concern now? Obama also included a call to American exceptionalism, saying “while I will never minimize the costs involved in military action, I am convinced that a failure to act in Libya would have carried a far greater price for America” (Obama 2011). Where was this call to American exceptionalism when it came to Syria?

As evidenced by Obama’s remarks, the United States’s attitude towards Syria reflects realism and a focus on protecting the best interests of the United States, while the attitude towards Libya reflects liberalism and a focus on exceptionalism and a view of the United States as a global peacekeeper. In the Syrian conflict, the United States did not put forth a formal intervention effort against Assad, signaling a change in ideals between the Libyan conflict and the Syrian conflict.

The United States is one of fifteen nations comprising the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) which makes decisions about foreign intervention efforts worldwide, but failed to authorize a coordinated intervention in Syria. Regardless of the UNSC’s inability to intervene, the United States intervened by contributing funds and weapons to the opposition, which fueled the conflict (Ruhayem 7).

However, the U.S. policy which supported the rebels also weakened the opposition as a whole, according to Ruhayem. The U.S. marginalized fighters which it saw as a threat by exerting pressure on its “loyal factions” to separate from other groups. The United States provided aid unevenly in order to favor its chosen factions (Ruhayem 7). This practice served as

a way to measure local support, but it fractured the opposition deeply. In addition to arming the opposition in Syria, the U.S. armed rebels to counter Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon, which took pressure off of the regime (Ruhayem 8). Gradually, the United States shifted its focus to countering jihadist groups rather than fighting the Syrian government directly.

A decisive moment in the United States foreign policy came in 2013, when the Syrian military killed hundreds of civilians using sarin gas in August 2013 (Itani 6). Previously, President Obama had set a "red line" on the use of chemical weapons in Syria, but the U.S. decided not to strike the regime despite its abuse (Itani 6). This lack of follow-through weakened U.S. credibility in Syria, weakened ties with previously loyal rebel groups, and signaled to the world that the United States would not be a reliable protector of the Syrian people (Ruhayem 6). One could say that this seemed like an isolationist shift in American policy.

As ISIS continued to advance in 2014, the U.S. decided to step in directly against it. American forces began to bomb northern Syria in order to counter the group. Many Syrian rebels felt at odds with this decision, but since they depended on U.S. aid, the fight turned towards ISIS. However, one rebel who was not receiving U.S. support said "We need more focus on our fronts with the regime. We cannot be distracted by the Daesh [ISIS] front and allow the regime to advance" (Ruhayem 8). This shift in strategy seemed like an abandoning of the United States's original goals in Syria. Skepticism came from the international community as well as from the Syrian rebels: "The campaign against the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) was artificially compartmentalized from the broader Syrian war. This highlighted to allies and adversaries the lack of U.S. interest in addressing the Syrian conflict's core drivers" (Itani 1). For all intents and purposes, the United States had abandoned the rebel cause when it shifted its

sights towards ISIS. Coordinated efforts for foreign support to the Syrian opposition forces dwindled, leaving the Anti-Assad forces disoriented and lacking resources. In turn, better-organized extremists benefitted as the war continued (Itani 1).

ISIS reached its peak expansion in summer 2014 and but was successfully contained, which is a product of U.S. intervention (Ruhayem 10). “It might be said that the United States lost its proxy war against the Syrian regime and won its open war against ISIS” (Ruhayem 10). While countering ISIS was an important success in the region, it may have helped Assad’s regime instead of countering it. The U.S. has committed a long-term military presence on the Syria-Iraqi and Syria-Israeli border in the name of containing ISIS and preserving Israel, but was not willing to pay the price of “more decisive engagement” that could have shortened the conflict in Syria in 2012 and 2013 (Itani 2). The U.S. stepped in against ISIS as part of a “war on terror” and therefore it was a countering move against Islamic terrorism, which the U.S. percieved as a direct threat. The U.S.’s willingness to intervene directly against ISIS but not Syria reflects a realist attitude that protects the homeland at all costs, rather than a liberal attitude that protects others.

The United States entered the Syrian conflict with the strategy of containing the war. As evidenced by the expansion of ISIS and the extension of the Syrian battleground to Iraq and Lebanon, containment was a failed policy (Itani 6). Becoming involved in Syria, according to Wilson, was a “cheap, opportunistic gamble for America and a long, bloody war for the regime, the rebels, and the rest of Syria” (11). The United States spoke of supporting Syria, but did little to support the outcome of the revolution or take responsibility for what followed (Ruhayem 5).

The U.S. along with the UNSC unanimously adopted resolution 2254 in 2015 which established the basis for meaningful political transition for Syria. This resolution expressed support for free and fair elections that would be administered under UN supervision. This UN resolution was a way for the U.S. to support Syria's regime change on paper, even though Obama stated that regime change was not a goal of the United States (Obama 2011). It would be too costly and risky, given past failed interventions in Iraq and Libya. "It was never our goal to quickly topple the regime," former U.S. Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford said in a November 2016 interview."How would you topple it without direct U.S. military intervention? And no one in the administration, not me, not Clinton, not Petraeus, not anyone wanted U.S. direct military intervention. No one did" (Ruhayem 6). Given the U.S.'s quickness to intervene in Afghanistan and Iraq a decade prior, this change in attitude seems like a dramatic shift towards non-interventionism.

Obama and Trump

Of course, it is impossible to analyze United States military interventions and strategies without analyzing the commanders-in-chief behind the operations. As mentioned before, Barack Obama was the United States President at the beginning of the Syrian conflict, and held office between 2009 and 2016. When Donald Trump took over the American presidency in 2017, he took on a different strategy with Syria. Both presidents reflect varying ideologies in various capacities, including American exceptionalism, isolationism, non-interventionism, liberalism, and realism.

Obama and Trump hold very different views on American exceptionalism. In fact, Obama began his presidency by questioning American exceptionalism - something that earned

him criticism throughout his entire presidency. In 2009, when a journalist asked about America's "special standing in the world," Obama responded "I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism" (Curran 8). In this statement, Obama put American exceptionalism at the same level as other countries rather than above them, which had been the tradition. Perhaps Obama's less-glorified belief in American exceptionalism played a role in his hesitancy to intervene in Syria. Trump, on the other hand, put forth a new interpretation of American exceptionalism in his inaugural speech in 2017. In this speech, he spoke of a "glorious destiny" for the United States, but was not referring to America as a global peacekeeper. Rather, he was referring to a more internal quality that would raise up American citizens who struggled during the Obama years (Curran 8). Here, he did not use American exceptionalism as justification for foreign intervention, but rather for the lack of— Americans are so exceptional that they should not have to help others.

In his presidential campaign in 2016, Trump hinted at isolationism as a means of gathering popular support. "Trump magnified the feelings of failure arising from the recent experience of America's global engagement. For many analysts...the course of US interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan is a significant factor in the popular loss of faith in America's global role" (Curran 5). Instead of speaking about foreign policy, Trump focused on domestic interests and dwelled on the failures of intervention efforts in the past. America, it seemed, is no longer interested in lengthy interventions in the name of democracy and peace. In contrast, Obama centered his policy around similar concerns, but took a different approach. He adopted the "leading from behind" approach as a way to fulfill a liberal duty of the United States while also

fulfilling a need to step back and create a "more sustainable American foreign policy" (Curran 8). This was a response to what Obama saw as the overextension of George W. Bush's power in Iraq and Afghanistan in the early 2000s (Curran 8). With this ideology, Obama's actions are not quite isolationist, but perhaps non-interventionist. He will not order an intervention unless absolutely necessary. Obama furthers this idea with a speech six months after his inauguration, titled "A New Beginning." In this speech, Obama spoke about "controversy about the promotion of democracy in recent years" and how the U.S. government would support "governments that reflect the will of the people," while also saying that "no system of government can or should be imposed upon one nation by any other" (Itani 3). This speech clearly articulates justification for why Obama chose not to enforce regime change in Syria, and elaborates his view of the role of the United States in the international community. Even more explicitly, in a 2013 speech regarding Syria, Obama said, "many of you have asked: Why not leave this to other countries, or seek solutions short of force? As several people wrote to me, 'We should not be the world's policeman.' I agree, and I have a deeply held preference for peaceful solutions. Over the last two years, my administration has tried diplomacy and sanctions, warning and negotiations" (Obama 2013). In this same speech, he announced that he would not be personally authorizing airstrikes in Syria in response to Assad's use of chemical weapons.

Concerning liberalism as an ideology, Obama walked the line of liberalism and realism while speaking strongly and favorably of liberalism, but acting more in line of realism. His administration spoke in support of citizen-led revolutions and democratization in the Arab world, but did not put troops on the ground to contribute to these missions (Itani 4). As a whole, Obama and the United States cared more about being "on the right side of history," which favored

liberalism and democracy (Itani 4), than risking another controversial intervention. Trump, on the other hand, while not speaking in the typical terms of liberalism, took on a guardian role regarding Syria in a way that Obama did not. For example, the United States and European allies launched airstrikes on Syrian military targets in April 2018 in order to punish Assad for chemical attacks against Syrian people (Cooper). "We are prepared to sustain this response until the Syrian regime stops its use of prohibited chemical agents," Trump said (Cooper).

The ideology where Obama and Trump perhaps have the most overlap is realism. Obama took the office of the American presidency following Bush's engagement in the Iraq War, which had fostered an anti-war sentiment, which helped put Obama in office (Itani 4). Even though Obama appealed to shared values, he showed skepticism of the use of U.S. power to enforce those values in the Middle East. "It was the Syrians' bad luck, then, that they launched their revolution just as the United States was drifting away from the core US foreign policy tenet of activist liberal internationalism, and the US role as enforcer of that order" (Itani 4). With the entrance of Obama came a necessary contemplation of America's role in the international community, and emphasized the need to protect the homeland.

Wilson points out that in a way, Obama left Trump a situation that works with Trump's "preferred scenario— one in which minimal investment is required to achieve American purposes" (Ruhayem 12). Going forward, Trump may be able to maintain control in a way that contains American enemies "while they bleed each other" (Ruhayem 12). This seems like a perfect balance of realism for a previously liberal government: minimal intervention and risk with maximum benefit.

Conclusion: continuity or change?

While the commanding actions of both Obama and Trump, as well as the international community, show more hesitation and restraint than during the Bush years in Iraq and Afghanistan, Corran notes that Trump is an exception to past American tradition. He describes a current of American exceptionalism beginning after the end of World War II that extends the belief that the U.S. has a special mission to spread democracy and liberty to all people around the world (Curran 1). “However, President Donald Trump is an exception. He believes that in the post-Cold War era successive administrations in Washington have pursued reckless visions of regional or global hegemony — especially in the Middle East — leaving the home front to languish and the nation open to ridicule. For Trump, the government must first protect its citizens and promote their prosperity” (Curran 1). This shift in priorities and the new inward focus marks a new era for America, even though Obama and Trump both tended towards a realist approach during the Syrian conflict.

Liberalism has been the trend of the international order in the Western world for the past 70 years (Curran 1). Trump’s actions such as withdrawing from the Iran nuclear deal and the Paris climate change accords convey the message to the international community that America may be tending towards isolationism. However, through looking at America’s actions in Syria over the last decade, it may be more accurate to say that the U.S. is shifting towards a more realist ideology rather than an isolationist one.

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