
Dynamics of Change in United States Policy in the Syrian Crisis: Analysis of the Transition from Diplomacy to Intervention

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ABSTRACT

The United States' policy toward the Syrian crisis (2011–2019) was marked by a significant and often inconsistent transition from diplomatic caution to direct military intervention. This article analyzes the dynamics of this policy evolution, moving beyond traditional state-centric explanations to examine the influence of cross-border flows. It argues that the transition was not a linear progression but a reactive and fragmented process driven by the interplay of three key factors: the failure of established international diplomatic mechanisms to resolve the conflict; the transnationalization of the threat landscape with the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS); and the powerful, albeit fluctuating, influence of global media narratives depicting humanitarian atrocities. This study maps the critical junctures that compelled policy recalibration by employing a qualitative process-tracing methodology and discourse analysis of official documents, presidential statements, and media reports. The findings demonstrate that key decisions from the "red line" ultimatum to the initiation of Operation Inherent Resolve were profoundly shaped by forces that transcended national borders, forcing policymakers to react to non-state actors, global information flows, and normative pressures. The research embodies an analytical and process-oriented approach that systematically investigates the evolution of US foreign policy during the Syrian crisis, emphasizing the underlying dynamics that prompted the transition from diplomatic engagement to direct intervention.

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INTRODUCTION

The Syrian crisis, which erupted in 2011 amid the broader upheavals of the Arab Spring, swiftly evolved from a domestic protest movement into one of the twenty-first century's most complex humanitarian and geopolitical conflicts (Blanchard, 2025). For the United States, the conflict posed a moral and strategic dilemma—balancing the ideals of democracy and human rights with national interests and regional stability (Lynch, 2016). At the outset, US policy toward Syria emphasized diplomacy, economic sanctions, and multilateral engagement to encourage political reform under Bashar al-Assad's regime (Hinnebusch & Zartman, 2016). However, as the violence escalated and the humanitarian crisis deepened, Washington's approach gradually transformed into more direct forms of intervention, ranging from support for opposition groups to targeted airstrikes and participation in the international coalition against the Islamic State (Sterling-Folker, 2013). This shift reflected a fundamental reorientation of American foreign policy in the Middle East.

The transition from diplomacy to intervention did not occur abruptly. Instead, it was the product of a complex interaction between structural, institutional, and contextual factors. Among these were post-Iraq "intervention fatigue," the diffusion of global power, the persistence of transnational terrorist threats, and the resurgence of rival powers such as Russia and Iran (Mesgarpour et al., 2020). Domestically, debates within the Obama administration revealed the tension between moral imperatives to protect civilians and the strategic caution to avoid another protracted military engagement (Brands, 2017). President Obama's decision not to authorize large-scale strikes following Assad's use of chemical weapons in 2013 epitomized this ambivalence, even as later US involvement in counterterrorism operations signaled a re-engagement under different justifications (GERGES, 2021). These fluctuations underscored the adaptive and often contradictory nature of US foreign policy in times of crisis.

From the perspective of Transnational American Studies, the Syrian case provides a valuable lens through which to examine how US foreign policy

operates within a global network of interactions rather than in isolation. US power is mediated through transnational institutions, allied states, advocacy groups, and international media discourses (Lionberger, 2017). The shift from diplomacy to intervention in Syria thus cannot be understood solely as a reflection of domestic decision-making, but also as a response to transnational pressures—ranging from humanitarian advocacy and public opinion to the constraints of international law and alliance politics. This framework underscores the dialogical nature of American influence: its ideals of democracy and responsibility are constantly negotiated and reinterpreted within the global political order (Chandler, 2015).

Bureaucratic and institutional complexities within the US foreign policy apparatus further shaped the dynamics of this policy transformation. Competing agencies pursued divergent agendas: the Department of State prioritized diplomatic resolution, while the Department of Defense and intelligence agencies emphasized limited intervention to counter terrorism and curb regional adversaries (Geremedhn & Gebrihet, 2024). Meanwhile,

congressional polarization and public scepticism toward new wars constrained decisive action (PILLAR, 2018). The result was a fragmented, reactive policy marked by oscillations between engagement and restraint, idealism and pragmatism—mirroring the broader ambivalence of American global leadership in a multipolar world.

This study analyzes the dynamics of change in US policy toward Syria by examining the processes and rationales underlying the transition from diplomatic engagement to military intervention between 2011 and 2016. It aims to identify the turning points in this policy evolution, the domestic and international drivers behind them, and their implications for the future of American foreign policy. The central argument advanced here is that this transformation was not a sudden rupture but a gradual adaptation shaped by moral imperatives, security concerns, and institutional inertia within the US foreign policy establishment (Krenn, 2022; Nguyen, 2013).

Methodologically, the research adopts a qualitative approach, employing process tracing and discourse analysis of official statements, policy documents, and secondary literature. It draws on

speeches, congressional hearings, and reports from international organizations to reconstruct the sequence of decisions and contextual dynamics that defined US engagement in Syria. By situating the analysis within national and transnational frameworks, the study contributes to broader debates on foreign policy change, interventionism, and the evolving nature of American hegemony.

Ultimately, the Syrian crisis serves as a critical case for assessing the endurance of liberal interventionism in an era marked by declining US primacy and rising multipolar competition. The shift from diplomacy to intervention reveals how the United States negotiates the tension between its self-perceived moral responsibility and the constraints of global politics. Understanding these dynamics sheds light on the trajectory of American policy in Syria and provides insights into the future contours of US engagement in international crises.

To substantiate this thesis, this analysis focuses on the period from the beginning of the uprising in 2011 to the territorial defeat of ISIS's caliphate in 2019, covering the critical policy decisions of both the Obama and Trump

administrations. The following section will outline the theoretical framework, combining Foreign Policy Analysis with a transnational lens. Subsequently, the article will trace the policy evolution through three distinct phases—from diplomatic maneuvering to the reluctant intervention against ISIS and the eventual normalization of a US military presence—before concluding with the findings and their implications for understanding US foreign policy in a globalized world.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design that integrates process-tracing with discourse analysis to investigate the complex dynamics of US policy change in the Syrian crisis.

Research Approach: Qualitative Process-Tracing

The primary analytical approach is process-tracing, a highly effective method for explaining historical outcomes by examining the sequence of events and causal chains that lead to them. Rather than simply correlating an input (e.g., a chemical attack) with an output (e.g., a policy shift), this approach reconstructs the decision-making pathway to identify critical junctures and

understand how specific factors became influential. For this study, process-tracing will be used to map the evolution of US policy from 2011 to 2019, pinpointing key moments, such as the 2013 Ghouta chemical attack, the rise of ISIS in 2014, and the 2017 Khan Shaykhun attack, to analyze how these events were processed within the US foreign policy apparatus and why they resulted in a transition from diplomacy toward intervention (Schoon & Duxbury, 2019). This approach is particularly well-suited to uncovering how transnational pressures were filtered through domestic political and bureaucratic structures to effect change.

Data Source

The research is based on a comprehensive review of primary and secondary sources to ensure a robust and triangulated analysis. Primary sources are crucial for understanding the official positions and internal logic of US policymakers. They include: official White House press briefings and policy statements; presidential speeches and executive orders; State Department cables and diplomatic communications (made public through archives or sources like WikiLeaks); congressional testimonies and reports from relevant committees; and United Nations Security Council resolutions

and debates involving the US. This data provides a direct window into the formal justifications and declared rationale for policy decisions.

Secondary sources provide critical context, expert analysis, and alternative perspectives. They consist of: peer-reviewed articles from leading journals in international relations, security studies, and American studies; in-depth analytical reports from reputable news organizations (such as The New York Times, The Guardian, The Wall Street Journal, and Al Jazeera); and policy reports from non-partisan think tanks (e.g., the Council on Foreign Relations, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and the International Crisis Group). This material is crucial for corroborating official accounts and understanding the broader strategic and political environment.

Methods of Analysis: Discourse Analysis

Complementing the process-tracing approach, this study utilizes discourse analysis to examine how the Syrian crisis was framed in language and why these frames mattered. Foreign policy is not only enacted but also discursively constructed; how a problem is defined shapes

the range of perceived solutions. This analysis will systematically examine the rhetoric used by US officials to describe the conflict, its actors, and the stakes for America. Key discursive shifts will be analyzed, such as the framing of the conflict evolving from a "civil war" to a "humanitarian catastrophe" and, most critically, to a "transnational terrorist threat". By analyzing the language surrounding pivotal events, such as President Obama's "red line" statement and the official justifications for airstrikes against ISIS, this study will demonstrate how discourse enabled and constrained policy options, intervening in a strategic choice and a narrated necessity. This method is vital for revealing how transnational media narratives were absorbed and re-articulated by policymakers to justify the shift from diplomacy to intervention.

DISCUSSION

Analysis: Phases of Policy Transition

The evolution of US policy in the Syrian crisis was not a linear progression but a series of reactive shifts driven by the failure of existing tools, the emergence of new threats, and the influence of powerful

transnational narratives. This analysis traces this transition through three distinct phases, demonstrating how the US moved from a position of diplomatic caution to becoming an active military participant in the conflict.

Phase I (2011-2013): The Primacy of Diplomacy and the "Red Line" Discourse

In the initial phase of the Syrian conflict, US foreign policy was heavily influenced by a desire to avoid engaging in another protracted military commitment in the Middle East, which stemmed from a widespread "war weariness" following the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Obama administration's strategy was fundamentally anchored in diplomatic efforts complemented by rhetorical pressure aimed at the Assad regime, exemplified by the pivotal proclamation in August 2011 that President Bashar al-Assad "must step aside" (Mahmood et al., 2021). This declaration symbolized a normative stance rather than a clear operational intent, leading to limited policy tools that mainly encompassed sanctions and attempts to cultivate an international consensus for political transition through United Nations channels (Shen, 2025).

However, the effectiveness of such diplomatic approaches was consistently thwarted by the opposition from Russia and China, both of whom issued multiple vetoes at the UN Security Council, thereby protecting the Assad regime from significant international repercussions (Kwuelum, 2024). This consistent failure of established diplomatic mechanisms highlights a critical driver of policy change; international institutions' ineffectiveness in imposing change in Syria emphasized the limitations of a purely diplomatic strategy in addressing the complexities of the civil war (Kwuelum, 2024).

The turning point for US policy came in August 2012, when President Obama's informal remark about a "red line" regarding the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime transformed into a significant discursive commitment. The subsequent chemical attack in Ghouta in August 2013 thus placed the US in a policy dilemma: a preemption of military intervention was expected, positioning the administration to act decisively. However, the choice to retreat from possible airstrikes in favor of a Russian-brokered agreement to dismantle Syria's chemical arsenal was viewed globally as

a retreat, which not only achieved a non-proliferation objective but also underscored the administration's deep-seated reluctance to intervene militarily (Gammeltoft et al., 2022). This episode signaled a decisive moment wherein the administration's diplomatic-only approach was revealed to be inadequate in the face of escalating violence and the recalcitrance of both the Assad regime and its allies.

The early phase of US policy in Syria demonstrates an intricate tension between normative commitments and practical limitations within a fragmented international order. The intractability of the Assad regime's position, fortified by international support from states like Russia, illuminated the challenges facing US diplomatic efforts and foreshadowed a subsequent shift towards a more interventionist posture in response to evolving circumstances on the ground (Harvey-Valdés et al., 2025; Poghosyan, 2024).

Phase II (2014-2016): The Transnational Threat and Reluctant Intervention

The dramatic emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) fundamentally transformed the calculus of US involvement in the Syrian

conflict, representing the second and most critical driver of policy transition. Unlike the Assad regime, whose brutalities were contained mainly within Syria's borders, ISIS's expansive territorial ambitions and its direct threat to Western security prompted an urgent reevaluation of US foreign policy (Krenn, 2022).

The key shift occurred during the summer of 2014 with the harrowing public executions of American journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff. These acts were emblematic of a carefully orchestrated media strategy by ISIS, designed not merely as battlefield violence but as transnational provocations aimed at eliciting a decisive response from the West (Asuming et al., 2022). The framing of ISIS as a "network of death" and as a significant apocalyptic terrorist threat with global ambitions marked a critical discursive shift in Washington's perception of the conflict. This reframing allowed the Obama administration to advocate for military action on firmer grounds of counterterrorism and national security rather than contested humanitarian principles, such as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) (Lammich, 2025).

In response to the escalating threat posed by ISIS, the United States undertook military operations under Operation Inherent Resolve, which involved targeted airstrikes and support for local partner forces, particularly the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). This military posture represented a definitive end to the previous non-interventionist stance, as the US transitioned into a direct combatant in the Syrian conflict (Kobakhidze, 2022). Though the intervention was characterized as limited and focused on the immediate threat of ISIS, it nonetheless marked a substantial shift in US policy, demonstrating a willingness to engage militarily in a conflict that had once been deemed a distant civil war.

This intervention's calculated yet restrained nature reflected the complexities of US strategic interests in the region, balancing the immediate need to combat a predatory group like ISIS with the broader goal of avoiding a full-scale military engagement reminiscent of prior conflicts in the area (Kounalakis, 2015). This dual approach highlighted the evolving nature of threats in a globalized era and the challenges of enacting

effective foreign policy in an increasingly intertwined international landscape. The rise of ISIS necessitated a swift and strategic US response, fundamentally reshaping its involvement in Syria and underscoring the complex interplay between evolving security threats and decision-making processes in US foreign policy (Asuming et al., 2022).

Phase III (2014-2019): The Normalization of Intervention and Competing Interests

By the time the Trump administration took office, US direct military involvement in Syria had become a normalized aspect of American foreign policy. The ongoing anti-ISIS campaign continued to evolve, yet a significant shift occurred following the Khan Shaykhun chemical attack in April 2017. This incident marked a critical juncture in US military engagement, contrasting sharply with the previous administration's more cautious approach after the Ghouta chemical attack in 2013. President Trump's immediate response was to order a swift Tomahawk missile strike on the Shayrat airbase, signifying a decisive and rapid military action that had not been characterized before US interventions in Syria (Gammeltoft et al., 2022).

A pivotal factor behind this shift in policy was the influence of mediatized humanitarian narratives, representing the third driver of US policy change. President Trump publicly cited the harrowing televised images of children suffering from the gas attack as a crucial motivation for the airstrike (Asuming et al., 2022). This narrative of suffering allowed the administration to frame its military action as a necessary humanitarian intervention, projecting an image of American resolve and decisiveness that contrasted with the perceived inaction of the Obama administration. By employing such performative acts of intervention, Trump aimed to establish a commitment to addressing humanitarian crises while simultaneously reasserting US power in the region (Bolan et al., 2020).

The decision to strike the Shayrat airbase demonstrated a critical evolution in US foreign policy in Syria, showcasing a willingness to engage militarily based on the immediate need to respond to atrocities rather than extensive deliberations about long-term strategies or consequences. This shift not only marked an acceptance of military action as an available tool but also illustrated a

broader expansion of US strategic objectives beyond merely defeating ISIS, also to include containing Iranian influence in the region. This repositioning further entrenched the American military presence in a complex multi-sided proxy war involving various state and non-state actors operating in Syria (Wenani et al., 2023). The Trump administration's response to the Khan Shaykhun chemical attack encapsulated a significant policy transition that reflected a potent mix of media influence, US strategic interests, and the prevailing humanitarian discourse. The normalization of military intervention in Syria underlines the complexities of US foreign policy, illustrating how immediate perceptions of humanitarian crises can dramatically influence decision-making within the framework of realpolitik in the Middle East (Bolan et al., 2020; Wenani et al., 2023; Gammeltoft et al., 2022).

The Undercurrent of Transnational Narratives

The influence of transnational narratives throughout the Syrian conflict has been profound, shaping the moral and political environment within which US policymakers have operated. These narratives, which flowed across

borders via global media and the internet, helped maintain the visibility of the human cost of the conflict, ensuring that it remained a pressing issue on the international stage. Notably, pivotal images such as the viral photo of toddler Alan Kurdi, who tragically drowned while fleeing the conflict, humanized an otherwise abstract refugee crisis for a global audience. This single image significantly impacted public sentiment and increased pressure on Western governments to respond more decisively to the unfolding humanitarian disaster (Gammeltoft et al., 2022).

Similarly, the haunting image of Omran Daqneesh, covered in dust and sitting dazed in an ambulance after an airstrike in Aleppo, emerged as another powerful symbol of civilian suffering. These images transcended geographic boundaries, resonating emotionally and prompting calls for action across various media platforms (Zeno, 2022). Transnational non-state actors, particularly groups like the White Helmets, who documented rescue efforts and attacks through social media, played a critical role in bypassing state-controlled narratives and providing a continuous flow of information regarding the crisis. This need

for transparency regarding human suffering added a layer of moral pressure on policymakers in the US and elsewhere.

While these narratives did not directly dictate policy decisions, they created significant moral justification and urgency for interventions, such as the 2017 missile strike on Shayrat airbase following the Khan Shaykhun chemical attack (Mocca, 2020). The imagery associated with these events ensured that the humanitarian impact of the ongoing violence could not easily be ignored, framing the crisis as a global human event rather than merely a distant geopolitical problem. Consequently, this constant flow of information and emotionally charged visuals contributed to windows of political pressure that influenced the timing and nature of US military actions, evidencing how public sentiment can indirectly drive foreign policy decisions in times of crisis (Wenani et al., 2023). The persistent and powerful influence of transnational narratives illustrates the complex interaction between media, public perception, and policymaking in the context of the Syrian conflict, underscoring the reality that humanitarian crises are not

merely political or military challenges but deeply human issues that compel action (Geremedhn & Gebrihet, 2024; Tsourapas, 2025). As policymakers navigated this landscape, they faced the dual challenge of addressing immediate security concerns while responding to humanitarian imperatives shaped by global narratives.

CONCLUSION

This article analyzed the dynamics that drove the significant shift in US policy toward the Syrian crisis, from an initial posture of diplomatic caution to one of direct military intervention. The analysis has demonstrated that this transition was not a coherent, strategically planned progression but a reactive and often fragmented process. The evidence traced through three distinct phases supports the central thesis that this evolution was propelled by a convergence of factors that transcended traditional statecraft. The failure of international diplomatic frameworks created a policy vacuum, the emergence of ISIS as a potent transnational threat provided a new and compelling justification for action, and the persistent undercurrent of mediatized humanitarian narratives shaped the political and moral context for key

decisions. The U.S. was not a wholly independent actor but was pushed and pulled by global forces that it could not fully control. The findings of this study offer a significant contribution to the field of Transnational American Studies by providing a clear case study of the modern American state's porous nature. It challenges purely state-centric or geopolitical interpretations of US foreign policy, arguing that such a lens is insufficient for understanding 21st-century global engagement. The Syrian crisis illustrates how the boundaries between the "domestic" and the "foreign" are increasingly blurred. Transnational phenomena—whether a non-state actor like ISIS using social media, a viral image of a suffering child, or the global flow of refugees—are not external factors but are integral forces that penetrate and co-constitute the decision-making processes of the state. This work reinforces the argument that to study "America" in the world today is to examine its complex entanglement with global dynamics that it simultaneously shapes and is shaped by.

The implications of this transformation are profound. Strategically, the inconsistency of U.S. engagement in Syria undermined its

credibility among allies and adversaries, raising doubts about Washington's willingness to enforce international norms. Morally, the selective nature of intervention-focused primarily on counterterrorism rather than civilian protection—exposed the tension between liberal ideals and pragmatic restraint. Politically, the United States' cautious posture allowed rival powers such as Russia and Iran to fill the ensuing power vacuum, reshaping the regional balance and signaling a decline in American dominance in the Middle East.

COMPETING INTEREST STATEMENT

Herewith, the author declares that this article is totally free from any conflict of interest regarding the assessment, review and revision, and publication process in general.

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