

KILIC BUGRA KANAT

# A TALE OF FOUR AUGUSTS

OBAMA'S SYRIA POLICY



REVISED AND ENLARGED SECOND EDITION

SETA



# **A Tale of Four Augusts**

Obama's Syria Policy



# **A Tale of Four Augusts**

Obama's Syria Policy

KILIC BUGRA KANAT

SETA

*Ankara 2016*

**KILIC BUGRA KANAT** | Kilic Bugra Kanat is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Penn State University, Erie and a research director at the SETA Foundation at Washington, D.C. He received his doctoral degree in Political Science from Syracuse University. He holds a master's degree in Political Science from Syracuse University and a master's in International Affairs from Marquette University. He completed his undergraduate education in the International Relations Department of the Middle East Technical University. Dr. Kanat also holds a Certificate of Advanced Studies in Middle Eastern Affairs and Certificate of Advanced Graduate Study in Conflict Resolution. His research interests include foreign policy decision-making, foreign policy change, and domestic politics and foreign policy interaction. He was also selected for the Future Leaders Program of Foreign Policy Initiative. Dr. Kanat's writings have appeared in Foreign Policy, The Diplomat, Insight Turkey, Middle East Policy, Arab Studies Quarterly, Mediterranean Quarterly, Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies, and Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs. He is a columnist for Daily Sabah. He is also co-editor of an edited volume – History, Politics and Foreign Policy in Turkey – published by the SETA Foundation.

SETA Publications 7  
First Published in 2015  
Second Edition Published in 2016  
ISBN: 978-605-4023-79-0

© 2016 SET Vakfı İktisadi İşletmesi

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical or other means, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Cover: Ümare Yazar

Layout: Erkan Söğüt

Printed in Turkey, Istanbul by Turkuvaz Haberteşme ve Yayıncılık A.Ş., September 2016

SETA Publications  
Nenehatun Caddesi No: 66 GOP Çankaya 06700 Ankara Turkey  
Tel: +90 312.551 21 00 | Fax : +90 312.551 21 90  
[www.setav.org](http://www.setav.org) | [kitap@setav.org](mailto:kitap@setav.org)

*Cover Photo: US President Barack Obama speaks about Syria from the Rose Garden at the White House in Washington, DC, on August 31, 2013. AFP / Jim Watson*

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	7
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>ONE THE BUSH YEARS</b> (2001-2008)	<b>17</b>
<b>TWO THAWING RELATIONS BEFORE THE ARAB SPRING</b> (FEBRUARY 2009-MARCH 2011)	<b>33</b>
Stability in Iraq	53
Middle East Peace	59
Non-Proliferation	67
<b>THREE THE ARAB SPRING THUNDERS THROUGH SYRIA</b> (MARCH 2011-AUGUST 2011)	<b>79</b>
<b>FOUR OBAMA CALLS FOR ASSAD'S REMOVAL</b> (AUGUST 2011-AUGUST 2012)	<b>97</b>
<b>FIVE OBAMA'S RED LINE</b> (AUGUST 2012-AUGUST 2013)	<b>119</b>
<b>SIX A NEW CALCULUS</b> (AUGUST 2013-AUGUST 2014)	<b>139</b>
<b>SEVEN FIGHTING AGAINST ISIS</b> (AUGUST 2014 - AUGUST 2015)	<b>171</b>
<b>EIGHT RUSSIAN MILITARY INTERVENTION</b> (AUGUST 2015)	<b>197</b>
TIMELINE OF U.S.-SYRIA RELATIONS (OCTOBER 2008 TO APRIL 2016)	217



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Erol Cebeci for his support during the writing of this book. Kadir Ustun's comments and edits have been very helpful. Sally Judson and Sonya Khattak edited several versions of this study. I also warmly thank Erica Hanichak and Lesley Dudden for their contribution to the book through their extensive research. Erica Hanichak's insight into the evolution of the administration's Syria policy was invaluable.



# INTRODUCTION

The Syrian conflict began as a revolution but quickly descended into a major humanitarian disaster. The Assad regime's increasing use of force and the militarization of the dispute between the regime and the opposition created the space for a protracted conflict that would attract a number of outside influences. The emergence of ISIS and its expansion in Iraq further complicated the conflict and changed the nature of foreign intervention in Syria. The longevity and complexity of this civil war has led the international community to abandon the country as the result of growing reluctance by Western countries, including the U.S., to engage in the conflict despite the gross violation of human rights and constant breach of international norms and principles. Despite different initiatives and "cessation of hostilities agreements" the country is still witnessing a gloomy reality on the ground. There is little evidence to suggest that true breakthroughs toward lasting peace are possible in the near future. The ever-growing death toll, thousands of documented cases of war crimes and systematic torture, the use of weapons of mass destruction and the rise of radical groups have all failed to stir a robust American response. Although diplomatically the U.S. has participated in negotiations and mediation attempts, it avoided a direct engagement. U.S. policy remained largely unchanged between the start of the conflict, and August 2014, when two American journalists, James Foley and Steven Sotloff, were violently beheaded by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Even then, President Obama's strategy only entailed plans to "degrade" and "destroy" ISIS, with very little reference to the future of Syria or the Assad regime. Although some argue that the fight against the ISIS has been successful,<sup>1</sup> there are too many question marks about the overall success of the operations at this point. And although another round of talks

<sup>1</sup> Mark Thompson, "U.S. Bombing of ISIS Oil Facilities Showing Progress," *Time*, December 13, 2015, "<http://time.com/4145903/islamic-state-oil-syria/>."

started in the Geneva II talks in January 2014, it immediately became clear that these talks would also be insufficient.

So far, President Obama's new strategy has been almost unanimously considered ineffective to eliminate ISIS from the region. It fails to provide comfort and peace for the Syrian people and stability to the region. Even after the airstrikes began, very little had changed in the lives of ordinary Syrians. In many ways, the situation continues to deteriorate. The formation of the international coalition was not meant to end the brutality of the Assad regime, which is the root cause of the emergence and rise of radical groups in Syria, but rather continues to focus solely on eliminating ISIS. In the meantime Europe has been brought to its knees by the major humanitarian crises stemming from the outpouring of refugees from the region. Today even the most optimistic analysts in Washington, D.C. project that U.S. policy will only change after the departure of the Obama administration in 2016 and the election of a new president. For many that we interviewed in Washington, D.C., including observers of U.S. foreign policy on Syria, journalists and former members of the administration, the most significant determinant of U.S. policy on Syria has been the opinion of President Obama's inner circle, a few close advisers. The position of these individuals closely matches the worldview and foreign policy vision of President Obama, who, along with his inner circle, determined the U.S.'s Syria policy, sometimes without consulting major figures and actors in the absence of any interagency process.

The Syrian public feels that it has been forsaken by the U.S. given its apparent neglect or even deliberate abandonment despite President Obama's statement that "Assad must go" in August 2011. The unfortunate trajectory of U.S. foreign policy in Syria emerged after five Augusts of inaction, indecisiveness and a lack of strategy. The policy inefficiencies of the White House have greatly contributed to the deterioration of the situation on the ground, bringing Syria into the nightmare scenario that frightened and worried many actors in the region. The Assad regime has flouted international human rights norms and deployed SCUD missiles, barrel

bombs, chemical weapons, and committed crimes against humanity and war crimes against its own citizens. Although the extent of the tragedy has surpassed that experienced in Rwanda and the lawlessness nearly mirroring the situation in Somalia, the U.S. administration was unable to foresee the possible security fallout from Syria until ISIS became a major threat.

This book provides an overview of the past seven years of U.S. policy in Syria. It brings together the major turning points of this policy since the birth of the Arab Spring and the policies embraced by different actors since 2009. The first section is dedicated to explaining President Obama's attempt to restore ties with the Syrian government after the 2008 Presidential Election. This effort was undertaken as an attempt to resolve the foreign fighters problem facing Iraq at the time. A second goal of this effort was to launch a subsequent peace process between Arab states and Israel as well as address the issue of weapons of mass destruction facing the region. Despite opposition from both Congress and segments of foreign policy elite in Washington, President Obama appointed an ambassador to Damascus and official talks were launched during his first two years in office. The shift in policy resulted in a gradual increase in the level of discussions between U.S. and Syrian officials. However, this process was disrupted by the Arab Spring and the Assad regime's heavy-handed response to the outbreak of demonstrations in his country. The use of force by the regime during demonstrations and the increasing number of casualties that resulted drove the U.S. to change its course of action in its relations with Syria.

Assad's brutal crackdowns on peaceful demonstrations prompted President Obama to issue what would become the token statement of his Syria policy, "For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside."<sup>2</sup> At that time, this was interpreted as a first step towards a comprehensive action plan to displace the regime in Syria, which

<sup>2</sup> Scott Wilson and Joby Warrick, "Assad Must Go, Obama Say," *The Washington Post*, August 18, 2011, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/assad-must-go-obama-says/2011/08/18/gIQAelheOJ\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/assad-must-go-obama-says/2011/08/18/gIQAelheOJ_story.html).

would include using force against the regime and aiding rebel groups. However, this expectation soon proved to be misguided, as the U.S. instead entrenched itself in a policy of indecision and inaction. It appeared that the message “Assad must go” was given to avoid missing the possible overthrow of the regime and in the name of “being on the right side of history,” rather than as the product of a real policy planning process.

Another major turning point occurred when President Obama made a statement in August 2012 in response to a question about the rumors that the Assad regime was moving chemical weapons. He stated that U.S. policy towards the conflict would be revised should there be any attempt or evidence that the Syrian regime was prepared to use or had already been found to have used chemical weapons. He said, “We have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground that a red line for us is when we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus...That would change my equation...We’re monitoring that situation very carefully. We have put together a range of contingency plans.”<sup>3</sup> This statement was again interpreted as a sign that the U.S. was prepared to take decisive action to stop the Assad regime, this time from employing chemical weapons. However, U.S. posturing following the statement proved unable to deter the Assad regime from deploying such weapons. Following President Obama’s “red line” statement several reports surfaced confirming the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime against the opposition and civilians in different parts of Syria. The first attack was reported in December of 2012, but it did not garner a significant response from the U.S. Thus, the regime was undeterred from carrying out further usage of chemical weapons.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup>James Ball, “Obama Issues Syria a ‘Red Line’ Warning on Chemical Weapons,” *The Washington Post*, August 20 2012, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-issues-syria-red-line-warning-on-chemical-weapons/2012/08/20/ba5d26ec-ef7-11e1-b811-09036bcb182b\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-issues-syria-red-line-warning-on-chemical-weapons/2012/08/20/ba5d26ec-ef7-11e1-b811-09036bcb182b_story.html).

<sup>4</sup>Robert Johnson and Geoffrey Ingersoll, “Poison Gas Bombs’ in Syria Could Force US Intervention,” *Business Insider*, December 24, 2012, <http://www.businessinsider.com/assad-reportedly-using-chemical-weapons-homs-syria-rebels-2012-12>.

Gradually the intensity of the regime's chemical attacks became unignorable and finally, in 2013, the U.S. intelligence confirmed that the chemical weapons were indeed being used by the regime.. Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes stated in a press conference, "Following a deliberative review, our intelligence community assesses that the Assad regime has used chemical weapons, including the nerve agent sarin, on a small scale against the opposition multiple times in the last year."<sup>5</sup>

The third significant shaper of the administration's Syria policy occurred when the Assad regime used chemical weapons in the town of Ghoutta near Damascus in August 2013, exactly a year after President Obama's "red line" statement. The international community stood poised, expecting a rapid U.S. reaction that would include punitive military strikes and hasten the overthrow of the Syrian regime. However, President Obama's initial statements underlined that military strikes would not target the regime and the mission in question would not be aimed at overthrowing the Assad regime. Instead, President Obama explained that any U.S. military action would be limited to destroying the capability of the Syrian regime to launch subsequent chemical weapon attacks. Even then, many analysts signaled that the U.S. administration was very reluctant to take the necessary steps to achieve this limited goal. President Obama's decision to seek Congressional approval, in the wake of British Prime Minister Cameron's resolve to seek authorization from the UK parliament, was seen as a further sign of this reluctant position. Later, U.S. policy quickly took a U-turn a direct result of Russian diplomatic intervention. President Obama decided to refrain from launching an attack, to the dismay of the international community and an angered Syrian opposition. As it will be argued below, this judgement frustrated both the Syrian opposition and U.S. allies in the region. Frustrations stemmed from the confusion created

<sup>5</sup> Ben Rhodes, "Statement by Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes on Syrian Chemical Weapons Use," Statement, June 13, 2013 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/06/13/statement-deputy-national-security-advisor-strategic-communications-ben->

by the President's unfulfilled policies and the lack of a communication or deliberation with U.S. allies during the decision-making process.

Meanwhile, radical groups were gaining further ground in Syria. While the U.S. ignored calls for action from the international community, ISIS surpassed other rebel groups in Syria in numbers and capabilities and launched operations to destabilize Iraq. At the beginning of 2014, when asked about the potential impact of radical groups in Syria and particularly those who were affiliated with Al-Qaeda, President Obama referred to them as a "jayvee team" and clearly underemphasized the disruptive impact that the group would ultimately generate in the region. With its capture of Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq, in June 2014 ISIS proved to the world that it was no jayvee team, but instead a new contender in the Middle East ground game. When the group laid siege to Erbil, the U.S. quickly acted to protect U.S. servicemen and civilians in the city. Later in August 2014, when ISIS beheaded two American journalists, the Obama administration formally announced a plan to form an international coalition to "degrade" and "destroy" ISIS.

Since then, the ISIS strategy degraded but so far has been unable to eliminate the group or its infrastructure in Iraq and Syria. The U.S. strategy to fight against ISIS now includes a partnership with Kurdish YPG forces in Syria on the ground, as well as moderate Arab opposition groups. There have been multiple conflicting statements and insinuations about the U.S. position on the future of the Assad regime. Some statements by Secretary Kerry have indicated the readiness of the U.S. to accept a solution with Assad remaining in Syria as part of a transitional process.<sup>6</sup> These statements have garnered criticism from observers of U.S. policy owing to the confusion they have generated.<sup>7</sup> Different initiatives launched by

<sup>6</sup> Aaron Mehta and Joe Gould, "Has Kerry Opened the Door for Syria's Assad To Stay?" *Defense News*, December 17, 2015, <http://www.defensenews.com/story/war-in-syria/2015/12/17/kerry-hints-assad-may-stay-syria-russia-isis/77430660/>.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel McAdams, "White House Schizophrenia – Kerry: 'Assad Can Stay'; Obama: 'Assad Must Go,'" *Global Research*, December 20, 2015, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/white-house-schizophrenia-kerry-assad-can-stay-obama-assad-must-go/5497123>.

the U.S. and its allies, including a train and equip program, have failed to bring any meaningful change in the situation on the ground. Ultimately, the train and equip program was “put on hold” in Fall 2015 by the Obama administration.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to the continued state of military disarray in Syria, the summer of 2015 brought forward one of the most important humanitarian crises in recent decades. Thousands of Syrian refugees have fled to Europe in search of a safe haven. Many of these refugees have perished during this journey towards Europe. Pictures of drowned children, particularly images of young Alan Kurdi, have significantly shaped public opinion in the Western countries. However the impact of this development to the policies of the countries was limited.

In August of 2015 Russia formally launched its intervention into the Syria conflict. According to a document released in August 26, 2015, Russia signed an agreement with the Syrian regime that would allow Russia to deploy troops in Syria. According to this agreement, “Russian military personnel and shipments can pass in and out of Syria at will and aren’t subject to controls by Syrian authorities.... Syrians can’t enter Russian bases without Russia’s permission. And Russia disclaims any responsibility for damage caused by its activities inside Syria.”<sup>9</sup> Beginning in late August, news blogs and twitter users started to post information and images confirming Russian military deployment in Syria. Russia initially denied the reports of its deployment and later characterized the deployment of troops as an act of

<sup>8</sup> Michael D. Shear, Helene Cooper and Eric Schmitt, “Obama Administration Ends Effort to Train Syrians to Combat ISIS,” *The New York Times*, October 9, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/10/world/middleeast/pentagon-program-islamic-state-syria.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/10/world/middleeast/pentagon-program-islamic-state-syria.html?_r=0).

<sup>9</sup> Michael Birnbaum, “The secret pact between Russia and Syria that gives Moscow carte blanche,” *The Washington Post*, January 15, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/01/15/the-secret-pact-between-russia-and-syria-that-gives-moscow-carte-blanche/>.

military assistance for humanitarian aid purposes.<sup>10</sup> Later in September, Russia began launching airstrikes against opposition forces in Syria. Gradually, Russia increased its airstrikes and became another factor the U.S. had to contend with in its Syria policy. It spawned a major debate in U.S. about the effectiveness of the U.S.' intelligence capabilities on the ground as well as the administration's Syria policy.<sup>11</sup> The previously much discussed prospect of creating safe zone or ISIS-free zone in Syria ground to a halt as Russia inflicted a de-facto no fly zone over the north of the country.

The following chapters will examine U.S. policy in Syria over the last seven years within this framework of five different turning points. Chapters 1 and 2 provide context for the Obama administration's treatment of the Syrian civil war by analyzing the status of relations in the years preceding the conflict. They conclude that the Obama administration worked cohesively to try to reverse former-President George W. Bush's deliberate antagonizing of the Syrian regime and to launch a rapprochement with Assad to achieve its main goals in the Middle East. Chapters 3 through 7 address U.S.-Syrian relations since the Arab Spring. The last chapter will assess what changes, if any, stakeholders may expect in U.S. Syria policy during the Obama administration's remaining period and if there is any chance for the next president to play a more effective role in the resolution of this conflict.

<sup>10</sup> Simon Tomlinson, Will Stewart, and Jenny Stanton, "What IS Russia sending to Syria? Moscow admits delivering 'military supplies but no extra troops' to Assad – as U.S. warns build-up compares to Putin's incursion in Crime," *Daily Mail*, September 10, 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3229223/Just-Russia-sending-Syria-Moscow-admits-delivering-military-supplies-Assad-dodges-claims-Putin-deploying-extra-ground-troops.html>.

<sup>11</sup> "Congress reportedly investigating possible intel lapses over Russian presence in Syria," *Fox News*, October 8, 2015, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2015/10/08/congress-reportedly-investigating-intel-lapses-over-russia-in-syria-as-nato.html>.

## **ONE** THE BUSH YEARS (2001-2008)

- ■ U.S. foreign policy under George W. Bush represented one of the most complicated periods of U.S.-Syrian relations in recent history.



U.S. foreign policy under President George W. Bush represented one of the most complicated periods of U.S.-Syrian relations. Following 9/11, relations between the two countries became increasingly complex. The Bush administration's willingness to target not only terrorist organizations, but also states that were allegedly sponsoring terrorist attacks generated a high degree of anxiety in Syria. In his address to the nation on the night of September 11, 2001, President Bush stated that the United States "will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them."<sup>12</sup> This was an important issue for Syria as it had been on the U.S.' list of states sponsoring terrorism since 1979, stemming from its direct and/or logistical support for different groups, including Hezbollah. Thus President Bush's statement raised the prospect that the Syrian regime would become a target in the U.S. led global war on terror. However, the Syrian government acted quickly to prevent such a situation and join the U.S. War on Terror; providing valuable intelligence on a number of different groups emerging in the Middle East.

According to former American military and diplomatic officials, by early 2002, Syria had become one of the CIA's most effective intelligence allies in the fight against terrorism in the region.<sup>13</sup> The Syrian regime had successfully compiled a large amount of intelligence about al-Qaeda fight-

<sup>12</sup> George W. Bush, "Address to the Nation on the Terrorist Attacks," September 11, 2001 (online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project) <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=58057>.

<sup>13</sup> Seymour M. Hersh, "The Syrian Bet," *The New Yorker*, July 28, 2003, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2003/07/28/the-syrian-bet>.

ers, cells and recruiters operating in the Middle East and Europe. Syrian intelligence was extremely valuable for U.S. counter-terrorism operations, especially in Germany. Furthermore, Syria also began providing access for the FBI and CIA to launch intelligence-gathering operations within Syria, in cities such as Aleppo. Some of the information provided by the Syrian regime to the U.S. was actionable intelligence. According to Seymour Hersh, Syrian intelligence reportedly detected that al-Qaeda was preparing an attack similar to its 2000 attack on the USS Cole against the U.S. Navy in Bahrain. Syria provided the news to the U.S., effectively aiding the U.S. in thwarting the attack. In addition to providing intelligence, Syria also assisted the U.S. in preventing an attack on an American target in the Canadian capital, Ottawa.<sup>14</sup> The country also became an important destination for suspected terrorists detained by U.S. forces. <sup>15</sup> A great many of these detainees were transferred to Syria in order to be interrogated and tortured by Syrian officers within the extraordinary rendition program. These Syrian officers would then sent any information acquired through interrogations to the U.S. government.<sup>16</sup>

In the early phase of the War on Terror, the Syrian regime turned a potential crisis with the U.S. into an opportunity. At the end of the day, the regime in Damascus seized the situation that arose in the aftermath of the 9/11 as a chance to improve relations with the U.S.. The War on Terror would prove extremely instrumental to end the international isolation of the Syrian regime and even as a mechanism to convince the U.S. to remove Syria from the list of countries sponsoring terrorism.<sup>17</sup> This would allow

<sup>14</sup> Hersh, "The Syrian Bet."

<sup>15</sup> Fisher, Max, "A staggering map of the 54 countries that reportedly participated in the CIA's rendition program," *The Washington Post*, February 5, 2013, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2013/02/05/a-staggering-map-of-the-54-countries-that-reportedly-participated-in-the-cias-rendition-program/>

<sup>16</sup> Ian Cobain, "CIA Rendition: More than a Quarter of the Countries 'Offered Covert Support,'" *The Guardian*, February 5, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/feb/05/cia-rendition-countries-covert-support>.

<sup>17</sup> Hersh, "The Syrian Bet."

the Syrian regime to earn international legitimacy and to be considered a “normal nation” in a crisis-ridden Middle East. Additionally, if leveraged properly, the Syrian regime saw that it could label domestic dissents—in particular, the Muslim Brotherhood of Syria—as terrorists and gain international support for its operations against these groups. This would strengthen the government, as a tool of deterrence, vis-à-vis any groups that dared to stand against the Syrian regime.

However, things did not go as smooth as the Syrian regime hoped. The new relationship grew sour following the U.S. invaded Iraq. Syria opposed the operation, and after it became clear that the U.S. would not go back on its decision, Syria ceased intelligence sharing with U.S. agencies effectively ending its cooperation with the U.S. against Al-Qaeda. Syria did move alongside the U.S. to vote in favor of UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1441, demanding that Iraq permit the renewal of the UN supervisors’ work. However, this support was explained by Damascus as an attempt to stop the warfare between Iraq and the U.S. rather than a position taken in partnership with the U.S..<sup>18</sup> Damascus was openly against any military attack against or invasion of Iraq. The leaders of the regime, including President Bashar al-Assad and Foreign Minister Faruq al-Sahara, openly denounced the invasion plan. During an interview, Assad stated, “No doubt the U.S. is a superpower capable of conquering a relatively small country, but the U.S. and Britain are incapable of controlling all of Iraq.”<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, Syria’s Grand Mufti, Ahmad Kaftaru, asked Muslims to “use all means and martyrdom operations to defeat the American, British and Zionist aggression on Iraq.”<sup>20</sup> At the same time, the Syrian regime

<sup>18</sup> Moshe Ma’oz, “Washington and Damascus: Between Confrontation and Cooperation,” *United States Institute of Peace Special Report* 146 (2005): <http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/sr146.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch, “Defying the Hegemon: Syria and the Iraqi War,” (paper presented at the European Consortium on Political Research conference, Budapest, Hungary, September 2005) [https://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/media/school-of-international-relations/mecacs/workingpapers/defying\\_the\\_hegemon.pdf](https://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/media/school-of-international-relations/mecacs/workingpapers/defying_the_hegemon.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

let the public freely criticize and demonstrate against the American intervention. During this period, the Syrian regime seriously feared that once the U.S. was done with its mission in Iraq, the administration would turn to Syria as its next target.<sup>21</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of the Iraq invasion, relations between the two countries deteriorated.<sup>22</sup> First, reports showed that Syria was allowing foreign fighters to transit through its territories into Iraq.<sup>23</sup> Intelligence agencies reported that almost 80 percent of foreign fighters in Iraq flew through Damascus to join the insurgency.<sup>24</sup> These fighters joined insurgent groups, particularly al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which posed the most substantial challenge to U.S. efforts to stabilize the country. Although the Syrian government denied any link with these groups,<sup>25</sup> employees of the U.S. Embassy in Damascus reported that they often witnessed pro-al-Qaeda rallies in front of the embassy compound, a situation that they believed could only occur with the tacit consent of the Syrian regime.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, in 2004, the Bush administration handed the Syrian government a list of 34 operatives based in Syria that were suspected of involvement in the insurgency in Iraq as well as in the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The Syrian government detained only one of these operatives, fostering the growing distrust of Damascus in Washington.<sup>27</sup> After mounting pressure in February 2005, Syria handed over the stepbrother of Saddam Hussein and deported a

<sup>21</sup> Alfred B. Prados and Jeremy M. Sharp, "Syria: Political Conditions and Relations with the United States After the Iraqi War," *CRS Report for Congress*, January 10, 2005, <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/42483.pdf>.

<sup>22</sup> Wallsh, "Syrian Alliance Strategy in the Post-Cold War Era."

<sup>23</sup> BS

<sup>24</sup> Peter Baker, *Days of Fire: Bush and Cheney in the White House* (New York, Anchor Press, 2014), 557.

<sup>25</sup> Syria fights allegations it aids Iraq insurgency, *NBC News*, December 28, 20014, [http://www.nbcnews.com/id/6763729/ns/world\\_news-mideast\\_n\\_africa/t/syria-fights-allegations-it-aids-iraq-insurgency/#.Vx\\_Y8KtKrlg](http://www.nbcnews.com/id/6763729/ns/world_news-mideast_n_africa/t/syria-fights-allegations-it-aids-iraq-insurgency/#.Vx_Y8KtKrlg)

<sup>26</sup> Anonymous, interview by Kilic Kanat, July 2014.

<sup>27</sup> Robin Wright, "U.S. and UN Step Up Pressure on Damascus," *The Washington Post*, February 16, 2005, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A26044-2005Feb15.html>.

number of foreign fighter recruiters to North African countries.<sup>28</sup> However, that was not enough to persuade the U.S. that Syria was “a reliable ally”.

Bush administration officials disagreed over how to counter the flow of fighters into Iraq from Syria. David Petraeus, proposed traveling to Damascus and personally confronting Bashar al-Assad face-to-face. Journalist Peter Baker cited Petraeus’ colloquial description of Assad’s actions: “You’re basically allowing poisonous snakes to have a nest in your country with the understanding they only bite the neighbors’ kids and sooner or later that backfires and they end up biting your kids and then they do worse.” Assad signaled that he was willing to meet with Petraeus in an effort to gain some degree of legitimacy, despite the awkwardness of the President meeting with the commander of U.S. forces in Iraq, which were considered invaders by the same regime. However, officials at the White House refused to engage in dialogue with the Syrian regime at such a high level without Damascus taking significant steps towards meeting U.S. demands.<sup>29</sup> The more hawkish members of the administration, including then Deputy National Security Advisor Elliott Abrams, went a step further by arguing that dialogue was futile and recommending military strikes on the airport in Damascus to cripple the flow of foreign fighters.<sup>30</sup> Although the Bush administration did not attack the Damascus airport, there were limited military strikes by the U.S. inside Syria. For instance, in June 2003, U.S. troops attacked a convoy of military vehicles within Syrian territory, which resulted in the death of Syrian soldiers, infuriating the Syrian regime and creating further dismay in Damascus.<sup>31</sup>

The issue of foreign fighters was not the sole predicament between the two countries regarding Iraq. After the occupation of Iraq by U.S. forces and the subsequent foundation of a new Iraqi government, numerous ad-

<sup>28</sup> Hinnebusch, “Defying the Hegemon.”

<sup>29</sup> Michael Gordon, *The Endgame: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq from George W. Bush to Barack Obama* (New York: Vintage Press, 2014), 462.

<sup>30</sup> Baker, 558.

<sup>31</sup> Ma’oz, “Washington and Damascus.”

ditional factors began to generate new complications. The two countries disagreed over the newly created and U.S.-supported Iraq Governing Council. Syria opposed its structure, campaigning to rally the opposition against it. However, the Syrian government eventually voted to recognize the Iraqi Governing Council and restored its diplomatic relations with Iraq. However, the low level intensity crisis between Syria and U.S. persisted. There were disagreements between Baghdad and Damascus over the fate of Iraqi funds transferred to Syria prior to the invasion. The Iraqi Governing Council requested that the funds be returned from Syria while the Syrian government insisted that they were payments for Syrian businessmen.<sup>32</sup> In response to this growing crisis between the neighboring countries, President Bush signed HR 1828, *The Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Act*. This act imposed penalties on Syria “unless it ceases support for international terrorist groups, ends its occupation of Lebanon, ceases the development weapons of mass destruction, (WMD), and has ceased supporting or facilitating terrorist activity in Iraq.”<sup>33</sup> These sanctions included bans on selling military items and dual use items to Syria. Additionally, in the late phase of the Iraq War, the White House Freedom Agenda, along with the Bush administration’s attempts to overthrow authoritarian regimes and build democracies in the Middle East, became increasingly concerning for the Syrian regime.<sup>34</sup> For many in Damascus, this new agenda created the expectation that the U.S. would target additional Arab states with authoritarian governments following the fall of the Saddam regime.

While the developments in Iraq and increasing tensions between Syria and the U.S. generated a significant impasse, the assassination of Rafik al-Hariri, the former Prime Minister of Lebanon, on February 14, 2005

<sup>32</sup> Hinnebusch, “Defying the Hegemon.”

<sup>33</sup> Prados and Sharp, “Syria: Political Conditions and Relations with the United States After the Iraqi War.”

<sup>34</sup> “Fact Sheet: President Bush’s Freedom Agenda Helped Protect The American People,” The White House, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/freedomagenda/>.

brought relations between the two countries to a new low.<sup>35</sup> For decades, the U.S. and Western countries requested that the Syrian regime pull its troops from Lebanese soil. However, with the Iraqi crisis, pressure to withdraw the troops reached a new high. Although Syria pulled some of its troops in 2003, a significant number of soldiers remained in Lebanon with the capacity to play a significant role in the country. Later in 2004, under the leadership of the U.S., the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1559 formally calling on Syria to withdraw its forces from Lebanon.<sup>36</sup> However, Syria did not comply and continued to intervene in Lebanese domestic affairs, leading to the resignation of al-Hariri in protest. After a few months later, he was assassinated in Beirut in February 15th, 2005.

The United States, along with most Western countries at the time, believed Syria was accountable for the assassination and ratcheted up criticism of the Assad regime. In a news conference, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice claimed that U.S. national security interests had begun to diverge significantly from those of the Syrian government. “The Syrian government is unfortunately on a path right now where relations are not improving but are worsening,” she noted.<sup>37</sup> The administration was careful not to link the Syrian government directly with the assassination, but most statements from high-ranking U.S. officials subtly implicated Damascus. Secretary Rice again signaled Syria’s culpability in an address to the international community: “When something happens in Lebanon, Syria needs to help to find accountability for what has happened there. There is a part of the destabilization that takes place when you have the kind of conditions that you do now in Lebanon thanks to Syrian interference.”<sup>38</sup> The days following Hariri’s assassination the U.S. government withdrew its Ambassador Margaret Scobey. The Syrian ambassador to

<sup>35</sup> Jeremy Sharp, “Syria: Background and U.S. Relations,” *Congressional Research Service*, April 26, 2010, 13; Hersh, “The Syrian Bet,” 7.

<sup>36</sup> Ma’oz, “Washington and Damascus.”

<sup>37</sup> Wright, “U.S. and UN Step Up Pressure on Damascus.”

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

U.S. Imad Moustapha played down this decision by calling it was a normal diplomatic procedure.<sup>39</sup> For the U.S. this was a more serious decision than the Syrians understood.

The Hariri assassination altered the American understanding of the Levant. decision-makers would thereafter find it impossible to ignore Syria's role in Lebanese instability. Tension with Syria escalated in the weeks following this declaration as Assad showed little remorse for his country's involvement in the Hariri assassination or in Lebanon's failed attempts at democratic consolidation. Former Syrian regime official Bassam Barabandi wrote that Assad had ordered his subordinates to do whatever necessary to obstruct investigations, whether by stalling the legal process, using Hezbollah to apply pressure on Lebanon, or fomenting violence in Iraq as a way to distract the international community.<sup>40</sup> Borrowing a page from his father's playbook, Assad encouraged regional instability to create problems for which he was the only solution, thereby making his regime more relevant to global powers. Still, Assad's posturing did not convince the White House that he no longer posed a threat to the Freedom Agenda. Instead, Lebanon's reaction to Syrian interference in the wake of the Hariri assassination only served to embolden the Bush administration's condemnation of Assad and commitment to its program of democracy promotion.<sup>41</sup> President Bush demanded that Syria disentangle itself from Lebanese politics, calling for the country to "withdraw its troops and secret services from Lebanon so as to allow Lebanon's upcoming elections to be held freely."<sup>42</sup> The U.S. was joined by France and the UN in its calls

<sup>39</sup> Lakely, James & Betsy Pisik, "U.S. recalls envoy from Syria," *The Washington Times*, February 16, 2005, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2005/feb/16/20050216-123423-9641r/?page=all>

<sup>40</sup> Bassam Barabandi and Tyler Jess Thompson, "Inside Assad's Playbook: Time and Terror," *MENA Source* (Atlantic Council blog), July 23, 2014, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/inside-assad-s-playbook-time-and-terror>.

<sup>41</sup> Baker, 383.

<sup>42</sup> Andrew Tabler, *In the Lion's Den: An Eyewitness Account of Washington's Battle with Syria* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2011), 84.

for Syria to back down, which proved effective on March 5, 2005, when Assad announced that Syria would implement its gradual and organized withdrawal from Lebanon.<sup>43</sup> Though Syrian capitulation on the issue of troop withdrawal demonstrated a modicum of good faith, Assad's ongoing support of Hezbollah prevented any meaningful progress on the status of U.S.-Syria relations.

Syria's reported nuclear activities remained the third source of tension in bilateral relationship. As Former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates described in his memoirs, reports from Israeli intelligence services in spring 2007 uncovered compelling evidence that North Korea was aiding Syria in building a facility capable of producing plutonium for nuclear weapons. This information generated a great discussion among U.S. officials on strategies to push Syria to halt its nuclear program. According to Gates' account, some officials in the administration, such as Vice President Dick Cheney, believed that U.S. interests were best served by launching military strikes on the facility: not only would strikes destroy the facility and cripple the program but they would also send a powerful signal to the other countries with nuclear aspirations, especially Syria's ally, Iran.<sup>44</sup> There were others, like Deputy National Security Adviser Elliott Abrams, who advocated leaving a military response up to Israel, who was eager to demonstrate its military might after its failure to conclusively end its war with Lebanon in 2006.<sup>45</sup> Still, others advocated doing nothing because they believed the U.S. had enough problems fighting the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and should not start a third, particularly when the Bush administration was facing heavy criticism for the faulty intelligence that led to the invasion of Iraq. Moreover, these officials were reticent to cooperate militarily with Israel against an Arab country for fear of inflaming regional

<sup>43</sup> "A Death in the Middle East: Hariri's Murder Casts Uncertain Future for Lebanon," *Spiegel*, February 24, 2005, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/a-death-in-the-middle-east-hariri-s-murder-casts-uncertain-future-for-lebanon-a-343485.html>.

<sup>44</sup> Robert Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2014), 384.

<sup>45</sup> Baker, 552.

tensions. One final camp, which included Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, advocated implementing a diplomatic initiative that would push to dismantle the facility without the use of force.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, these policy debates became a moot point when Israel decided to strike the facility unilaterally. It is still unclear how much the U.S. knew prior to the attacks, but it was a welcome solution.

In the midst of all of these crises, some individuals in the Bush administration began to advocate for unilaterally attacking Syria on the basis of its nuclear facilities and/or because of its active support for the insurgency in Iraq. Bilateral relations were minimal despite some level of dialogue to stop the flow of foreign fighters. During this period, the U.S. did everything in its power to undermine the Assad regime. It was clear that the country was experiencing a number of serious challenges. The imposition of harsh economic sanctions and the withdrawal of the U.S. ambassador had greatly alienated Syria, which was already facing growing international reproach. President George W. Bush rejected domestic and international pressure to engage Syria as a way to advance the Arab-Israeli peace process because he feared such a move would undermine Syria's global isolation.<sup>47</sup> Instead, he declared that "it would be counterproductive" to engage Syria in talks, as "Syria knows exactly what it takes to get better relations."<sup>48</sup>

During this period, all three branches of the U.S. government were acting in concert to isolate the Syrian regime. Congress passed the 2003 *Syria Accountability and Restoration of Lebanese Sovereignty Act*, which had damaging repercussions on the Syrian regime's economy. The White House also declared a national emergency in respect to Syria in May 2004, which harshened economic sanctions in reaction to Syria's support for different

<sup>46</sup> Gates, 387.

<sup>47</sup> International Crisis Group, "Restarting Israeli-Syrian Negotiations," *Middle East Report No 63*, April 10, 2007, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/israel-palestine/063-restarting-israeli-syrian-negotiations.aspx>.

<sup>48</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President on the Global War on Terror," April 20, 2007 (online by U.S. Department of State) <http://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ei/wh/83362.htm>.

armed groups in the Middle East.<sup>49</sup> The same year, the Department of Treasury designated the Commercial Bank of Syria “a financial institution of primary money laundering concern” and passed another set of sanctions against Syria.<sup>50</sup> This new set of sanctions had a significant impact on the economic relations of Syria. It limited “Syria’s ability to carry out activities involving U.S. currency or repatriate its oil revenues while simultaneously dissuading foreign entities from commercial dealings with Syria.”<sup>51</sup> Targeted sanctions were implemented to freeze the financial assets of Syrian agencies and high-level officials. These sanctions, combined with President George Bush’s declaration of democracy promotion and freedom agenda, transformed the nature of the countries’ relationship. Syria no longer merely viewed U.S. actions as hostile, but considered them an existential threat. Likewise, the Bush administration regarded Assad’s government a “rogue regime” capable of endangering U.S. national security interests.

There were several exceptions to the U.S. policy of isolating Syria during this period, including several meetings between U.S. officials and their Syrian counterparts. One significant visit was conducted by Nancy Pelosi, who assumed the position of the Speaker of the House of Representatives after the midterm elections in 2006. In April 2007, Congresswoman Pelosi, despite some protests and opposition from the Bush administration, visited Damascus as part of a Middle East tour.<sup>52</sup> Following her meetings, Congresswoman Pelosi underlined U.S. concerns about Syrian support for Hamas and Hezbollah and expressed the necessity of launching a peace pro-

<sup>49</sup> BS. P.61

<sup>50</sup> BS. P 62

<sup>51</sup> International Crisis Group, “Engaging Syria? U.S. Constraints and Opportunities,” *Middle East Report No. 83*, February 11, 2009, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/-/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/83engagingsyriaconstraintsandopportunities.ashx>.

<sup>52</sup>Shadid, Anthony, “Pelosi Meets Syrian President Despite Objections From Bush,” *The Washington Post*, April 5, 2007, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/04/04/AR2007040401351.html>

cess between Israel and Syria.<sup>53</sup> However, despite these statements, the trip was harshly criticized by the Bush administration. President Bush affirmed that visiting Damascus in such a critical juncture meant sending mixed messages to the international community. He also stressed that there had been several other similar attempts by officials from different branches of government; however, those failed owing to the fact that the Assad regime did not take any meaningful steps in areas of international concern.<sup>54</sup>

Just days before the U.S. presidential elections in November 2008, another development strained relations between the two countries. After tensions between the two peaked over the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq, the U.S. unilaterally attacked several targets within Syria under the premise that they were preventing recruitment and training support for the ongoing insurgency in Iraq. On October 26, 2008, U.S. Special Forces launched an operation in the Syrian town of Abu Kamal in an effort to destroy key logistic networks that facilitated the passage of foreign fighters from Syria into Iraq.<sup>55</sup> Special Forces targeted Badran Turki Hishan al-Mazidih, also known as Abu Ghadiya, who was known to be a Syrian commander of AQI. According to U.S. sources, Abu Ghadiya “oversaw a network of training camps, including those run by more secular former Baath insurgents; he also met regularly with Syrian military intelligence officials, including Asif Shawkat, the country’s intelligence chief and brother-in-law to President Bashar al-Assad.”<sup>56</sup> Connecting the Syrian government with al-Qaeda was viewed as a serious accusation against Damascus. Unsurprisingly, the Syrian regime strongly denied the allega-

<sup>53</sup> Hassan M. Fattah and Graham Bowley, “Pelosi Meets with Syrian Leader,” *The New York Times*, April 4, 2007, [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/04/world/middleeast/04cnd-pelosi.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/04/world/middleeast/04cnd-pelosi.html?_r=0).

<sup>54</sup> “Bush Criticizes Pelosi’s Trip to Syria,” *The New York Times*, April 3, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/03/world/americas/03iht-web-0403bushap.5128610.html>.

<sup>55</sup> Ian Black and Ewen MacAskill, “US Forces Kill Eight in Helicopter Raid on Syria,” *The Guardian*, October 26, 2008, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/oct/27/syria-helicopter-attack>.

<sup>56</sup> Gordon et.al, 230.

tions. Eight people were killed in this unprecedented U.S. incursion into Syrian territory; however, Syrian sources denied Abu Ghadiya's presence in Abu Kamal and instead accused the U.S. of violating its sovereignty and perpetrating state terror.<sup>57</sup> Although some news networks accused the Syrian government of cooperating with the U.S. by allowing the attack on the Abu Ghadiya network, this information was never confirmed, leading many to consider the attack a serious escalation in U.S. hostility towards Syria.<sup>58</sup> In response to the attack, the Syrian government summoned the U.S. *chargé d'affaires*, Maura Connelly, and subsequently shut down U.S.-operated facilities such as language schools and cultural centers.<sup>59</sup> Friction between the U.S. and Syria after the Abu Kamal raid inflamed existing tensions and made it clear by 2008 that the bilateral relationship had reached the nadir of its history.

<sup>57</sup> Ann Scott Tyson and Ellen Knickmeyer, "U.S. Calls Raid a Warning to Syria," *The Washington Post*, October 28, 2008, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/10/27/AR2008102700511.html>; "US Helicopter Raid Inside Syria," *BBC News*, October 27, 2008, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/7692153.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7692153.stm).

<sup>58</sup> Dominic Waghorn, "Syria 'Gave Green Light For Raid,'" *Sky News*, October 28, 2008, <http://news.sky.com/story/644001/syria-gave-green-light-for-raid>.

<sup>59</sup> "US Helicopter Raid Inside Syria."



## **TWO** THAWING RELATIONS BEFORE THE ARAB SPRING (FEBRUARY 2009-MARCH 2011)

- ■ The U.S. hoped to encourage Syria to deny foreign fighters safe passage into Iraq, to distance itself from Iran, and to contribute more constructively to the Arab-Israeli peace negotiations by cutting funding to Hamas and Hezbollah.



"In terms of the Syrian-American relationship, the United States is committed to a dialogue based on mutual interest and mutual respect and a solid foundation for discussion of our shared goals and of real differences..."<sup>60</sup>

*U.S. Envoy George Mitchell, July 26, 2009*

Prior to stepping foot in the Oval Office, it was reported that a group of scholars and policymakers "affiliated" with the incoming administration visited a series of Middle Eastern countries, including Syria to assess the perception of the U.S. and the expectations of the new administration. The report presented to the White House at the culmination of this trip showed that the delegation had several meetings, including meetings with the Syrian officials. An important part of these meetings was focused on the possible impacts of the election of President Obama to the White House on the region and exploring the potential policy implications of this new period. However according to a report on Al-Ahram, the conversations also revealed some of the possible policy preferences the new administration would have regarding Syria. This very early report argued that there was a high degree of optimism amongst Syrian scholars and policymakers about the election of President Obama. The report mentioned that "The Syrians are hopeful that the visit would influence Obama's future Middle East policy and pave the way for rapprochement. Recalling the ping-pong diplomacy that brought the US and China closer decades ago, Syrian

<sup>60</sup> "Obama's Middle East envoy steps up diplomatic push in Syria," *The Guardian*, July 26, 2009, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jul/26/george-mitchell-syria-peace-talks>.

interlocutors voiced the hope that Syrian-US relations would soon be on the mend.”<sup>61</sup>

Although the ping pong diplomacy analogy is somewhat extreme in this situation, the hopes of the Syrians were not totally baseless. It is true that the question of relations with Syria was not on the radar of the Washington crowd in 2008. In the reports published to provide policy guidance for the new president by Washington think tanks, the issue of Syria did not receive much attention.<sup>62</sup> However, U.S.-Syrian relations would be a part of other foreign policy priorities of President-elect Obama in the Middle East. The president-elect was most interested in ensuring a smooth U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, containment of Iran’s regional ambitions and a comprehensive Middle East Peace program.<sup>63</sup> From his early days in office, President Obama signaled that the Syria file would be important for him. Key players of his foreign policy team from different agencies, including Assistant to the President of National Security Affairs James Jones, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee John Kerry— were all tasked with paying close attention to Syria with the aim off of establishing ties with the Syrian government and leveraging them to reach the President’s foreign policy objective in the Middle East.

Almost all of Obama’s foreign policy team believed that establishing direct communication with the Syrian government was the only way to convince Bashar al-Assad to cooperate with U.S. interests. According to reports, these administration officials believed that “it will be more palatable for American voters for Mr. Obama to launch his rogue nation outreach effort with Damascus rather than Iran and that dealing with the mullahs in Tehran would be much easier if they could no longer rely

<sup>61</sup> <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/Archive/2008/923/re6.htm>

<sup>62</sup> For an example of this see [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/obama\\_middle\\_east.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/obama_middle_east.pdf) . Also in this report Syria was not considered a major policy area although Israeli-Syrian track in the Middle East Peace was emphasized. See [http://www.brookings.edu/-/media/Projects/saban-cfr/restoring\\_the\\_balance\\_summaries.PDF](http://www.brookings.edu/-/media/Projects/saban-cfr/restoring_the_balance_summaries.PDF)

<sup>63</sup> Anonymous , interview by Kilic Kanat, July 2014.

on knee-jerk support from Syria.”<sup>64</sup> Specifically, the new administration hoped to encourage Syria to deny foreign fighters safe passage into Iraq, to distance itself from Iran, and to contribute more constructively to the Arab-Israeli peace negotiations by cutting funding to Hamas and Hezbollah.<sup>65</sup> In the long term, Syria's support of these U.S. foreign policy endeavors was thought to be a critical component of realizing the Obama administration's goal to gradually disengage from the conflict-prone politics of the region. Though the Obama administration faced pushback from lawmakers in Washington and the American public about strengthening relations with Syria, it hoped that the Syrian government would be receptive to warmer relations. However, after decades of tension between the two countries, the first steps would be hard to take. For President Obama and his administration, this first step would have to be resuming diplomatic relations at a time when they were at their frostiest.

President Obama, having very little leverage over Syria absent diplomatic representation and economic trade, had to forge a new path for U.S. engagement in the Middle East. During his first days in office media outlets reported that President Obama was considering how best to start this process. *The Telegraph* reported that “one source, who has discussed foreign policy directly with Mr. Obama in the last two weeks, has revealed that the President “is spending a lot of time thinking about Syria and how to improve relations.”<sup>66</sup> He even began to discuss strategies with different U.S. allies around the world. According to the same report “he believes the key to improving the political situation in the Middle East is to peel Syria away from its longstanding alliance with Iran, rather than to immediately start negotiations with Tehran over its nuclear weapons programme.”<sup>67</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Shipman, Tim, “Syria will be first rogue state to get Barack Obama charm offensive,” *The Telegraph*, January 24, 2009, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/barack-obama/4331776/Syria-will-be-first-rogue-state-to-get-Barack-Obama-charm-offensive.html>

<sup>65</sup> Steven Heydemann, interview by Kilic Kanat, January 2015.

<sup>66</sup> Shipman, Tim, “Syria will be first rogue state to get Barack Obama charm offensive”

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*

Thus President Obama openly started to draw the link between Syria and other issue areas in the Middle East.

In Syria the feelings and expectations about the new administration became increasingly optimistic. Syria welcomed the Obama administration in 2009 with an eagerness for engagement unparalleled in the history of the countries' bilateral ties.<sup>68</sup> Assad had viewed the 2008 presidential election as an opportunity to change the course of the countries' relationship.<sup>69</sup> Upon President Obama's victory and without any sign of immediate rapprochement, Assad still expressed content with the election results. In a statement after the elections, Assad revealed that he was actually following the U.S. elections quite closely and emphasized, "We are happy that [Obama] has said that diplomacy—and not war—is the means of conducting international policy."<sup>70</sup> The U.S. elections were important not only due to President Obama's emphasis on diplomacy, but also because they marked the end of an administration that was known for its predisposition to use direct military intervention to change regimes.

Immediately after the election, articles and commentaries started to appear in the Syrian media, which was known to be controlled by the Assad regime, favoring the idea of establishing better relations with the U.S. Under the leadership of Assad and with the strict censorship of the Syrian media, it was inconceivable to think that these pieces could have been published without the approval or consent of the Syrian regime. They showed that the regime was willing to influence public opinion to gain support for its envisioned renewed relations with the U.S. The regime did not wish to hear any alternative viewpoints that would challenge the regime's stance on this issue. In one of the notable pieces, Sami Moubayed, the editor-in-chief of *Forward Magazine*, wrote of the benefits of improving relations, yet qualified his optimism with ten requirements that the Obama administration would have

<sup>68</sup> Seymour Hersh, "Syria Calling," *The New Yorker*, April 6, 2009, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/04/06/syria-calling>, 2.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Hersh, "Syria Calling," 10.

to meet in order to normalize relations. These requirements were: 1) the reinstatement of the U.S. ambassador to Syria and thus formal restoration of diplomatic relations; 2) the end of the U.S. government's anti-Syria rhetoric, which was prominent during the Bush administration; 3) recognition by U.S. authorities of Syria's cooperation on assisting along the Iraqi border to halt the flow of foreign fighters and the insurgency; 4) U.S. cooperation to address the problem of the growing number of Iraqi refugees in Syria; 5) the abolition of sanctions and the Syria Accountability Act (E.O. 13338), and thus the normalization of economic relations between the two countries; 6) the facilitation of indirect Syrian-Israeli talks; 7) recognition of Syria's central role in resolving conflicts in the Middle East; 8) counterterrorism assistance; 9) an apology to the Syrian regime and compensation for the 2008 helicopter raid on the Abu Kamal village; and 10) the normalization of people-to-people diplomacy and distribution of visas to Syrian students who wish to study in the United States.<sup>71</sup> Although the magazine article did not cite or quote any Syrian foreign ministry official, experts interpreted the stated conditions as having been put forward by the Assad regime. After establishing *Forward Magazine*, Moubayed, formerly an ordinary journalist, was appointed by the Assad regime to serve on the "U.S.-Syria Working Group." In an article discussing Moubayed's appointment, Andrew Tabler of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy pointed out that Moubayed had been dispatched to Washington later "to exchange views with a number of policy think tanks and former U.S. officials with the goal of narrowing the gap between the two positions" in July 2008.<sup>72</sup>

Despite the conditions that were circulated in the public, through which the Syrian regime tried to imply that the U.S. stood to benefit more from the reinstatement of relations than Damascus, Syria had also

<sup>71</sup> Sami Moubayed, "Abu Hussein's Invitation to Damascus," *Asia Times*, November 7, 2008, [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle\\_East/JK07Ak02.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/JK07Ak02.html).

<sup>72</sup> Tabler, Andrew J., "Will Mitchell's Trip Bypass Damascus?" *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy - Policywatch 1506*, April 13, 2009, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/will-mitchells-trip-bypass-damascus>

had much to gain from building stronger lines of communication with the U.S. For instance, according to U.S. officials, Assad's top priority in 2008 was to relieve Syria's economy from sanctions imposed during the Bush era. The sanctions were undermining not only the economy of the Syrian state but also regime's domestic legitimacy. The White House was well aware of this vulnerability and used it as leverage in its interactions with the regime. From the very beginning, President Obama sought to ease the burden of sanctions on Syria's trade and commercial relations—especially in high-tech industries where the commercial aviation and information technology sectors had been hard hit. These sanctions, which were crippling the Syrian economy, risked fomenting domestic instability in the context of the emerging global financial crisis and could threaten the Assad regime's survival.<sup>73</sup> Assad thought that easing relations with the U.S. and improving the country's economic conditions would strengthen his standing in the country. The economic benefits were not the only windfall that Assad anticipated from the thawing of relations. He also wanted to rescue his country from the international isolation it had faced in the aftermath of 9/11 and especially following the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri. U.S. officials interpreted this move as Assad's way of expanding his country's areas of diplomatic influence so as to include the U.S. Political engagement in all forms, even photo opportunities, were highly emphasized over economic or security cooperation at the outset of communication.<sup>74</sup>

However, after the first steps of *détente* were initiated, both parties understood the nature of the new dynamique differently. In 2008, Syria regarded its foreign policy with a sense of what one U.S. official called “triumphalism”; the country had survived its painful disentanglement from Lebanese politics after the Hariri assassination and also accrued great po-

<sup>73</sup> Anonymous, interview by Kilic Kanat, July 2014.

<sup>74</sup> Anonymous, interview by Kilic Kanat, July 2014.; See also Seymour, “Syria Calling.”

litical capital in the Arab world when it resisted the U.S. invasion of Iraq.<sup>75</sup> The country's warming relations with Turkey and France, absent of apparent preconditions, contributed to its pretension, making the Assad regime believe that it was negotiating with the United States from a position of strength. Most important, however, Syria outlasted the economic sanctions, heated regional politics, and near-military clashes during the Bush era. President Obama's 2008 campaign, which was based on his characterization as the "anti-Bush" candidate, provided hope to the international community and in particular Syria that his election would mark the end of the "military adventures" of U.S. foreign policy. During one round of the 2007 presidential debates, Obama promised that he would meet unconditionally with the leaders of the traditional pariah states in U.S. foreign policy, including Iran, Syria, Venezuela, North Korea and Cuba. In that debate, he argued that "the notion that somehow not talking to countries is punishment to them—which has been the guiding diplomatic principle of this administration—is ridiculous."<sup>76</sup> Thus, President Obama's election was considered a victory for a new foreign policy approach of engagement as well as for Syria's hope of better bilateral relations.

Yet, while Syria was enjoying some form of triumphalism, U.S. State Department officials believed that it demonstrated hubris in its bargaining position with the U.S. According to embassy officials in Damascus, the regime's confidence reflected a naive understanding of the U.S.' political flexibility and intentions in its bilateral relationship with Syria.<sup>77</sup> Despite President Obama's willingness to launch a new initiative on Syria, he still faced significant political and technical impediments that would

<sup>75</sup> Anonymous, interview by Kilic Kanat, July 2014.; See also Tabler, *In the Lion's Den*, 218; Alon Ben-Mei, "Above the Fray: Syria Reasserts its Centrality to Peace," *Jerusalem Post*, October 22, 2010, <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Columnists/Above-the-Fray-Syria-reasserts-its-centrality-to-peace>.

<sup>76</sup> "Fact Check: Would Obama meet 'unconditionally' with Iran?" *Political Ticker* (CNN blog), September 25, 2008, <http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2008/09/25/fact-check-would-obama-meet-unconditionally-with-iran/>.

<sup>77</sup> "Kerry - Assad: Improving the U.S.-Syria Relationship," WikiLeaks, WikiLeaks Cable 160, February 27, 2009, [http://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09DAMASCUS160\\_a.html](http://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09DAMASCUS160_a.html).

make a quick rapprochement difficult. First of all, the full weight of Congress was against Syria at the time. Members of Congress were reactive to Syria's support and tolerance for foreign fighters flowing freely from Syria to Iraq, which contributed to the increasing number of American casualties in the war in Iraq. Some members of the Congress signaled dissent with the new agenda even before the beginning of the talks between U.S. and Syria, when there were talks about the upgrade of the EU's relations with Syria. While the U.S. was pursuing its hardline policy towards Syria, some members of the EU were signaling for a change in their Syria policy. Starting in the Summer 2008, French President Sarkozy began this change during his visit to Damascus, which formally ended the isolation of Syria from the EU. During a press conference with Assad, President Sarkozy stated that, "This is how we're going to rebuild our new relations with Syria, by trying to understand each other, by not compromising our principles and by reestablishing trust."<sup>78</sup> In December of the same year, British Foreign Minister David Miliband paid a visit to Damascus to meet with Assad. During this meeting it was announced that British government would re-establish high level intelligence ties with the Syrian government.<sup>79</sup> Negotiations also increased regarding an association agreement between the EU and the Syrian government.<sup>80</sup> Some within the U.S. Congress reacted harshly toward these debates. Congresswoman Ros-Lehtinen, the Ranking Republican on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, responded to these debates by stating, "a potential association agreement formalizing ties between Syria and the European Union would reward Syria at a time when it continues to evade questions re-

<sup>78</sup> Ibrahim, Alia, "French President, on Visit to Syria, Calls for Improved Ties Between Nations," *The Washington Post*, September 4, 2008, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/09/03/AR200809030303873.html>

<sup>79</sup> Schenker, David, "Decoupling Syria from Iran: Constraints on U.S.-Syrian Rapprochement," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, December 2008, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/decoupling-syria-from-iran-constraints-on-u.s.-syrian-rapprochement>

<sup>80</sup> Schenker, David, "The EU and Syria Move Closer," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy- Policy #1439*, December 11, 2008, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-eu-and-syria-move-closer>

garding its illicit nuclear program and ties to Iran and militant Islamist groups. The agreement would elevate Syria's diplomatic relationship with the EU to the level enjoyed by other Mediterranean countries."<sup>81</sup> This demonstrated that the upgrade of relations of the U.S. was not going to be an easy task for the President.

Furthermore, despite the Obama administration's willingness to restore ties with a nation that could play an important role in the attainment of U.S. goals in the region, President Obama's foreign policy was already failing to increase its degree of engagement with Middle Eastern countries. There was an absence of a long-term strategy regarding relations with Syria, despite the fact that restoring ties with Damascus held tactical and operational significance for U.S. policy in the region. This raised questions about the real objective or outcome of the U.S. strategy in Syria. In fact, engagement with Syria at this critical juncture was crucial for the military disengagement from Iraq however, in the final analysis, it was still peripheral to U.S. interests in the Middle East.

Congress certainly was not heartened by Syria's suspension of indirect talks with Israel in reaction to Operation Cast Lead against Gaza in 2008. Moreover, Syria's nuclear activity at al-Kibar put the White House in an awkward position regarding its nonproliferation priorities, as Syria refused to cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) investigations. If Assad proved uncooperative in his discussions with the U.S., the administration would be forced to consider re-committing its resources elsewhere to achieve its regional goals.<sup>82</sup> That is not to say that U.S. officials did not value Syria; on the contrary, former Ambassador to Israel Martin Indyk described Syria as the linchpin for dealing with both Iran and Israel-Palestine. Former President Jimmy Carter's visit to Damascus in December 2008, just after the U.S. elections, also raised awareness in

<sup>81</sup> "Accord with Syria Ignores Continued Deception, Obstruction," *House Committee on Foreign Affairs Press Office*, December 4, 2008, "Ros-Lehtinen Says Hasty EU <http://archives.republicans.foreignaffairs.house.gov/news/story/?891>

<sup>82</sup> Anonymous, interview by Kilic Kanat, July 2014.

regards to the place of Syria in U.S. policy towards the Middle East and the future of bilateral relations between these two countries. Syrian media's coverage of the visit was particularly impressive and raised optimism about the prospects of bilateral relations, as did the return of the U.S. ambassador to Damascus.<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, not all members of the Congress were against the improvement of ties with the state of Syria. During the transition period between administrations, a group of Congressmen from the Armed Services Committee also visited Damascus and met with Assad. The main topic was again the future of relations between the U.S. and Syria. Assad shared his optimism and high expectations for the future of bilateral relations between the two countries during the meeting.<sup>84</sup> However, these high-level visits and exchanges of opinion and the optimism among some about the future of bilateral ties did not automatically make the task at hand easier for the Obama administration.

Efforts to repair ties and cooperate with Syria commenced almost immediately following Pres. Obama's inauguration in 2009. The president requested that U.S. adversaries, including Syria, "unclench their fists" and accept engagement with the United States.<sup>85</sup> This was the first step toward the idea of restoring diplomatic ties and opening discussions with the rogue regimes of the international system. Though Secretary of State Hillary Clinton centered her focus on the Asia Pacific following indications that major policy issues in the Middle East would be addressed by the White House and Department of Defense, President Obama decided to utilize some resources of the State Department to engage with

<sup>83</sup> "Special Media Reaction Report: Jimmy Carter's Visit to Damascus," WikiLeaks, Wikileaks Cable 886, December 16, 2008, <https://wikileaks.org/cable/2008/12/08DAMASCUS886.html>.

<sup>84</sup> "Codel Smith: Assad Positive on New Bilateral Relations," WikiLeaks, Wikileaks Cable 94, February 1, 2009, <https://wikileaks.org/cable/2009/02/09DAMASCUS94.html>.

<sup>85</sup> "Barack Obama's Inaugural Address," *The New York Times*, January 20, 2009, [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/20/us/politics/20text-obama.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/20/us/politics/20text-obama.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

Syria and asked her to launch an initiative of engagement.<sup>86</sup> According to Andrew Tabler, President Obama imparted two guiding principles for engagement with Syria. The first was for the State Department to pursue engagement with Syria in order to fulfill President Obama's campaign promise to engage America's rivals. Second, the warming relations were not to be allowed to threaten in any way U.S. allies in Lebanon, who feared a Hezbollah victory in the June 2009 elections. Other than these stipulations, the State Department was given relative freedom to determine the terms of engagement.<sup>87</sup>

At the outset of the rapprochement, the administration acted cohesively and cautiously, choosing to test the diplomatic waters in February 2009. As a gesture of goodwill to the Syrian government, the Department of Commerce allowed the country's national airliner, Syrian Air, to procure an export license for Boeing 747 spare parts.<sup>88</sup> The shortage of spare parts in the Syrian aviation industry was considered one of the most destructive dimensions of the economic sanctions. It not only risked passengers' lives and generated a confidence problem for a state-owned enterprise, but it also created a prestige problem for the Syrian government. As such, the end of these sanctions was a huge relief for the Syrian government. Of course, President Obama also faced significant criticism and challenges from Congress about this decision. Following this sanction relief, Congresswoman Ros-Lehtinen made another statement arguing that the decision "rewards a regime of proliferation concern responsible for U.S. deaths in Iraq, political assassinations, and regional turmoil."<sup>89</sup> She continued, "less than a year ago, on May 8th, the national emergency

<sup>86</sup> Michael R. Gordon and Mark Landler, "Backstage Glimpses of Clinton as Dogged Diplomat, Win or Lose," *The New York Times*, February 2, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/03/us/politics/in-behind-scene-blows-and-triumphs-sense-of-clinton-future.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>87</sup> Tabler, *In the Lion's Den*.

<sup>88</sup> Sharp, "Syria: Background and U.S. Relations," 3.

<sup>89</sup> "Ros-Lehtinen Says White HOuse decision to waive Sanctions on Syria Rewards Extremist Regime and Undermines U.S. Interests," *House Committee on Foreign Affairs Press Office*, February 12, 2009 <http://archives.republicans.foreignaffairs.house.gov/news/story/?915>

with respect to Syria was extended because the actions of the Syrian regime were deemed to constitute ‘a continuing unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States.’ Has Syria altered its behavior significantly in the last 8 months to merit a reward from the new Administration?”<sup>90</sup>

However, despite these criticisms the Obama administration stayed the course on its Syria policy. Shortly after the relief of some sanctions, Secretary Clinton exchanged a few words with Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moallem in Egypt during a foreign ministerial meeting, arranging for future discussions between Syria and the U.S. that would include Syrian Ambassador to the U.S. Imad Moustapha, National Security Council Middle East Director Daniel Shapiro, and Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey Feltman.<sup>91</sup> At the very beginning, it was reported that Asst. Secretary Feltman’s inclusion in the talks dampened Syria’s enthusiasm for rapprochement. As the former U.S. ambassador to Beirut, he had made many enemies in Damascus for his sharp criticism of Syria’s role in Lebanese politics, particularly after the Hariri assassination. Reportedly, in February’s meeting, Asst. Secretary Feltman raised topics that antagonized Syrian officials, including Syria’s support for Hamas and Hezbollah, interference in Lebanon, its nuclear weapons program, and human rights issues.<sup>92</sup> Thus, Asst. Secretary Feltman’s appointment and the February meeting made for a rocky start for warming relations.

Following the meeting in Washington, Secretary Clinton announced that Feltman and Shapiro would travel to Damascus in March for talks with the regime. The initial steps of the rapprochement took place with

<sup>90</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> Spillius, Alex, “Hillary Clinton and Syrian counterpart shake hands as relations look to improve,” *The Telegraph*, March 3, 2009, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/4930142/Hillary-Clinton-and-Syrian-counterpart-shake-hands-as-relations-look-to-improve.html>

<sup>92</sup> David Kenner, “Tough Love for Syria from Obama,” *Passport* (Foreign Policy blog), March 3, 2009, [http://blog.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/03/03/tough\\_love\\_for\\_syria](http://blog.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/03/03/tough_love_for_syria).

the participation of different agencies from the U.S. government. During this process, Congress, despite the continuation of opposition of some, also played an active role in efforts to impact the direction of policy toward Syria. Senator Kerry, who had been a longtime supporter of diplomatic engagement with the Assad regime, paid a visit to Damascus shortly before the arrival of Feltman and Shapiro. He laid the groundwork by visiting Assad on his home turf to discuss parameters of engagement. After his conversation with the Syrian leader, Senator Kerry expressed optimism about Assad's commitment to repairing Syria's relations with the West. According to Senator Kerry, Assad seemed ready to change the course of his country and to politically engage with the Western world.<sup>93</sup> Senator Kerry's observations about Assad created a sense of hope among the pro-engagement officials in the United States. Feltman and Shapiro capitalized on these sentiments by broaching a number of controversial topics, ranging from the stabilization of Lebanon and the revival of Middle East Peace talks to the containment of the civil war in Iraq.

The visit was, for many, an attempt to push Syria away from its partnership with Iran and a window of opportunity for Assad to reconnect with the Western world.<sup>94</sup> However, in every step of the process, the U.S. reminded the attentive public of the potential problems that they may encounter throughout the engagement. There was a high degree of skepticism among Syria analysts at the State Department about the sincerity of Assad's steps. For instance, just before Feltman and Shapiro's visit, Secretary Clinton tried to temper the public's expectations for improvements in bilateral relations with Syria; nonetheless, policy analysts still considered the effort to be an announcement of a paradigmatic change in U.S. policy towards the region and a great progress in engaging adversaries in the Middle East. Feltman and Shapiro were

<sup>93</sup> Kerry - Assad: Dividing Iraq and Unifying Iran," WikiLeaks Cable 158; "Kerry - Assad: Improving the U.S.-Syria Relationship," WikiLeaks Cable 160.

<sup>94</sup> David S. Cloud, "U.S. to Send Two Envoys to Syria," *Politico*, March 4, 2009, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0309/19550.html>.

the highest-ranking administration officials to visit Syria since Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage's visit in 2005. Shortly after the announcement, they traveled to Damascus and conducted talks with FM Moallem, as well as presidential advisor Bouthaina Shaaban and Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Miqdad. Officials from both countries publicly described the meetings as very constructive and said that they had found "common ground" to serve as the foundation for future improvements in bilateral relations.<sup>95</sup>

The developments that followed this meeting proved that the steps taken to restore diplomatic ties and launch talks for cooperation in the region had been fruitful. Upon the conclusion of the U.S. trip, Assad gave a number of interviews to international news networks, during which he announced that he was prepared to play a constructive role in the Middle East Peace Process. There were also direct references to relations with the United States. In one of the interviews, he openly stated that he wanted to meet with President Obama in-person to discuss issues of mutual concern and interest. However, despite this public announcement, the White House believed that it was too early to provide Assad with such an opportunity to gain legitimacy.<sup>96</sup> The Obama administration decided to continue talks with Syria through Shapiro and Feltman and wait for the regime to take significant steps before engaging in higher-level meetings. Nevertheless, the February 2009 trip to Damascus paved the way for Syria to make a clear break from the political isolation it experienced during the Bush-era.<sup>97</sup>

Following the Feltman and Shapiro visit, a delegation from the Senate and House of Representatives, led by Senator Benjamin Cardin, visited Damascus. During this visit, Assad received the members of the delegation, who conveyed U.S. concerns about the burgeoning rapprochement. Several issues were tabled, including Iran's nuclear program, human

<sup>95</sup> Sharp, "Syria: Background and U.S. Relations," 3.

<sup>96</sup> Sharp, "Syria: Background and U.S. Relations," 3.

<sup>97</sup> Bilal Y. Saab, "On a New Footing: U.S.-Syria Relations," Brookings Institution, March 19, 2009, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/articles/2009/03/19-syria-saab>.

rights abuses in Syria, the Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations, the elections in Lebanon and the issue of Syrian support for terrorist groups. A leaked cable from the U.S. Embassy in Damascus revealed the disagreement between the U.S. delegation and Assad on these issues. According to the cable, Assad acknowledged that the issues were of serious concern for both countries; however, he requested that the delegation approach those issues from the Syrian perspective. For instance, Assad totally rejected the matter of Syria's support for foreign fighters. For him, Syria had nothing to gain from providing safe haven for foreign fighters and helping them organize attacks in Iraq. In addition, when Senator Cardin asked about the government's relationship with Hamas and Hezbollah, Assad responded by stating that both of these groups were elected representatives of the people in Gaza and Lebanon and that they were among the realities of regional politics. Assad also rejected the delegation's criticisms about human rights abuses in the country by arguing that Syria had made significant progress in human rights and that this point could not be discussed in the region while people in Gaza and Palestinian refugees were suffering under very harsh conditions.<sup>98</sup>

Feltman and Shapiro returned to Damascus in May 2009 for further talks with the Syrian regime. Although observers interpreted Syria's warm reception of the visit as a positive step toward implementing the U.S.'s policy of engagement, the actual content of the talks was kept strictly confidential. Speculation mounted that the talks addressed matters such as reinvigorating the Syrian-Israeli track of the Middle East peace efforts and engaging the country in matters of non-proliferation. Yet, some scholars, such as Syria expert Joshua Landis, were skeptical of these musings, arguing instead that President Obama sent Feltman and Shapiro to Damascus in order to signal the administration's resolve to the policy's strongest opponents, especially Israel. The timing of the visit

<sup>98</sup> "President Assad and Codel Cardin Discuss a Nuclear Iran, Peace Process, Terrorism and Human Rights," WikiLeaks, Wikileaks Cable 179, March 10, 2009, <https://wikileaks.org/cable/2009/03/09DAMASCUS179.html>.

was key. According to Landis, “[Obama] may want Israel to understand that it cannot make an end run around the President by going to Congress or the American Jewish community. During the week that AIPAC is meeting in Washington and senior Israeli statesmen are in town, Obama may simply be saying, ‘I am in charge of U.S. foreign policy. I can engage Syria if and when I want.’”<sup>99</sup> Assuming Landis’ premise was valid, Feltman and Shapiro’s summer visit marked another major break from the Middle East policies of President Obama’s predecessor. It seemed that President Obama would follow a more nuanced approach in his vision of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The geopolitical context of Feltman and Shapiro’s May visit to Syria was quite different than that during their first visit. In that second meeting, U.S. officials again met with Syrian FM Walid Moallem in what they described as “constructive and comprehensive” meetings.<sup>100</sup> While handling this process, the Obama administration was also trying to respond to concerns from Syria-skeptics arguing that such a full-scale engagement with the regime could be considered a reward for Syria. Some observers of Middle East politics in Washington, D.C. warned the administration against creating this perception. However, in an interview with *Al Jazeera*, Feltman made it clear that “[Obama] believes that talking should not be considered a reward—talking should be the means to achieve objectives.”<sup>101</sup> Publicly, Feltman purported that the visit marked progress but noted, “... this is part of a process and we’ll see how it develops...I’m sure the Syrians will be looking at choices we will be making in the future, just as we’ll be looking at choices that Syria is making.”<sup>102</sup> During a briefing following

<sup>99</sup> “What is Feltman Doing in Damascus,” *Syria Comment* (blog), May 7, 2009, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/what-is-feltman-doing-in-damascus/>.

<sup>100</sup> Tabler, *In the Lion’s Den*.

<sup>101</sup> “US Talks in Syria ‘Constructive,’” *Al-Jazeera*, March 10, 2009, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2009/03/20093713536371310.html>.

<sup>102</sup> “Teleconference by State’s Feltman in Damascus, Syria,” March 7, 2008 (online, IPP Digital, US Embassy), <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/texttrans/2009/03/20090309124703eai-fas9.014308e-03.html#axzz39x9r9Atm>.

the trip Feltman stated that the administration would be willing to pursue progress on this issue, stating “You know, it’s our view that we would be using engagement like this consistent with the President and Secretary’s desires to meet key objectives bilaterally, regionally, internationally. And it’s our view that, you know, Syria can play an important, constructive role in the region. And so Dan Shapiro’s and my visit here today was an opportunity to basically start achieving objectives by using diplomacy and dialogue as one of our tools.”<sup>103</sup> These statements demonstrated a cautious optimism toward the future of rapprochement between the two countries.

Cables leaked shortly thereafter revealed the true nature of the discussions, which were actually quite different than public pronouncements. According to the cables, Syrian officials conveyed extreme disappointment in the way that the United States had approached the process of engagement. Syrian officials had felt that they had made concessions on Iraq and Lebanon and received little in return for their efforts. FM Moallem expressed his skepticism about U.S. commitment to repairing bilateral relations. Despite Syria’s proximity to the Arab-Israeli conflict and its potential role as a player in the issue, U.S. Special Envoy on Middle East Peace George Mitchell bypassed the country on his tour of the Middle East, instead choosing to go to more peripheral countries like Morocco for negotiations.<sup>104</sup>

More importantly, President Obama renewed the notorious *Syria Accountability Act*—continuing strict sanctions for the country’s state sponsorship of terrorism—just as Feltman and Shapiro left for their visit.<sup>105</sup> In a letter to Congress, President Obama explained this decision to extend sanctions. He said that it was predicated on Syria’s ongoing efforts to pro-

<sup>103</sup> Feltman, Jeffrey D., “Special Briefing: Acting Assistant Secretary Feltman Briefs on Meetings With Syrian Officials,” *U.S. Department of State*, March 7, 2009, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2009/03/120122.htm>

<sup>104</sup> “Feltman-Shapiro Meeting in Damascus: Israeli-Syrian Peace Issues,” WikiLeaks, Wikileaks Cable 359, May 21, 2009, <http://cables.mrkva.eu/cable.php?id=208124>.

<sup>105</sup> “Feltman-Shapiro Meeting in Damascus: FM Muallim Questions US Commitment to Real Engagement,” WikiLeaks, Wikileaks 335, May 12, 2009, <http://cables.mrkva.eu/cable.php?id=206592>.

mote instability through terrorism, proliferation and insurgency in Iraq.<sup>106</sup> Nonetheless, the move jeopardized improvements in the U.S.-Syrian relations. FM Moallem followed up his criticism with a touch of hope that not all was lost, adding that he would consider moving forward with the negotiations as long as the United States offered a tangible increase in its level of commitment to restore ties with Syria. FM Moallem suggested that as a show of good faith, the U.S. should signal to French, German and Spanish aerospace companies that they could export and service Airbus and Dassault planes without fear of U.S. reproach.<sup>107</sup> Yet, this idea was rebuffed by Washington, who believed that offering the Syrian ambassador to Washington greater mobility of travel was concession enough barring greater buy-in from the Syrian government.

A subsequent high-level meeting was arranged between Syrian and U.S. officials, this time in Washington, D.C. Syrian Deputy FM Faisal al-Miqdad was invited to the American capital to meet with U.S. State Department officials. This was the first high-level visit by a Syrian official to the U.S. in eight years. The negotiations on sanctions against Syria were the main point of order on the agenda. Little information was revealed about the content and outcome of these meetings. FM Moallem released a statement signaling optimism. He also pointed to the difficulties and problems with mutual trust in the process. He stated, "The agenda is clear; it is continuing the Syrian-U.S. dialogue to normalize bilateral relations. There are, of course, many obstacles and suspicions after an eight-year suspension of contacts. The gap must be bridged. We cannot expect or pin large hopes on a first meeting to accomplish this mission. This is a continuing process and this is part of the dialogue. Therefore, we view this step as important."<sup>108</sup>

<sup>106</sup> Laura Rozen, "Peace Envoy Mitchell to Damascus?" *The Cable* (Foreign Policy blog), June 3, 2009, [http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/06/03/peace\\_envoy\\_mitchell\\_to\\_damascus](http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/06/03/peace_envoy_mitchell_to_damascus).

<sup>107</sup> "Feltman-Shapiro Meeting in Damascus: Syria Wants Help with Civil Aviation Waivers," WikiLeaks, Wikileaks Cable 344, May 14, 2009, <http://cables.mrkva.eu/cable.php?id=206978>.

<sup>108</sup> Sharp, "Syria: Background and U.S. Relations," 5.

Despite the problems and tensions aired during the meeting, the fact that the two countries had begun to engage in dialogue was considered a major step in improving the relationship. The most significant turning point in relations came in the form of a letter from President Obama to Assad in August 2009. Although the content of the letter was never made public, the letter allegedly demonstrated the commitment of the Obama administration to pursue its engagement with the regime in Syria.<sup>109</sup> After multiple high-level meetings, the priorities of the Obama administration became clear: bilateral relations would be improved on the grounds of Iraq, the Middle East Peace Process and nuclear non-proliferation. In this sense, the letter was the successful completion of this period and the introduction of full-scale engagement. Against this backdrop, an analysis of all three aspects of the new framework for engagement are discussed below.

#### STABILITY IN IRAQ

Promoting stability and security in Iraq was one of the main motivations for the Obama administration to reignite its relationship with Syria. The issue had previously been raised by the Iraq Study Group report, a bipartisan group appointed by the Congress to assess and evaluate the situation in Iraq during the war. In this report Syria was pinpointed as one of the sources of trouble that the U.S. was facing in Iraq. It was argued that “Syria is playing a counterproductive role. Iraqis are upset about what they perceive as Syrian support for efforts to undermine the Iraqi government. The Syrian role is not so much to take active measures as to countenance malign neglect: the Syrians look the other way as arms and foreign fighters flow across their border into Iraq, and former Baathist leaders find a safe haven within Syria. Like Iran, Syria is content to see the United States tied down in Iraq.”<sup>110</sup> The report also argued that the Syrians had indicated their desire for dialogue

<sup>109</sup> Andrew Tabler, “Syria Clenches Its Fist,” *Foreign Policy*, August 28, 2009, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/08/28/syria\\_clenches\\_its\\_fist](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/08/28/syria_clenches_its_fist).

<sup>110</sup> Baker, James A., III, & Lee H. Hamilton, Co-Chairs, “The Iraq Study Group Report, *Baker Institute*, December 5, 2006, [https://bakerinstitute.org/media/files/news/8a41607c/iraq-studygroup\\_findings.pdf](https://bakerinstitute.org/media/files/news/8a41607c/iraq-studygroup_findings.pdf)

with the U.S. In its recommendations, the report suggested that mending ties with countries like Syria could play an important role in the trajectory of the conflict in Iraq, stating that “Although the U.S.-Syrian relationship is at a low point, both countries have important interests in the region that could be enhanced if they were able to establish some common ground on how to move forward. This approach worked effectively in the early 1990s...Syria can make a major contribution to Iraq’s stability in several ways.”<sup>111</sup> A number of expectations were similarly outlined by the study group; 1-) “Syria can control its border with Iraq to the maximum extent possible and work together with Iraqis on joint patrols on the border. Doing so will help stem the flow of funding, insurgents, and terrorists in and out of Iraq.” 2-) “Syria can establish hotlines to exchange information with the Iraqis.” and 3-) “Syria can increase its political and economic cooperation with Iraq.”<sup>112</sup> However, these recommendations were not welcomed by President Bush who instead asserted that “it would be counterproductive at this point to sit down with Syrians, because Syria knows exactly what it takes to get better relations.”<sup>113</sup>

These recommendations were later taken into account by the incoming administration. President Obama, anxious to withdraw U.S. troops from Iraq, was frustrated with Syria’s permissive attitude toward foreign fighters, and for allowing them to use Syria as a passage into areas under U.S. occupation. The White House recognized the need to co-opt Syrian support on this critical issue if it was going to deliver on the promises the incoming President had made during the election. Assad was also aware of this expectation of the Obama administrations and sought to take advantage of the situation by signaling his willingness to help ease the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq.<sup>114</sup> Therefore, Feltman and Shapiro pressured Syrian officials in May to stem the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq. They first named four fighters known to be operating in Syria, requesting that the regime

<sup>111</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> Seymour Hersh, “Syria Calling,”

<sup>114</sup> Seymour Hersh, “Syria Calling,”

prevent their illegal activity. They next suggested that the Syrian government address the issue of foreign fighters more broadly. In both instances, the U.S. attempted to use a system of carrots and sticks to persuade the Syrian regime to engage in more concrete steps against foreign fighters.

During these negotiations U.S. officials constantly reminded their Syrian counterparts that a stable Iraq would be beneficial not only for the Iraqi people, but also for Syria, which shares an important border with its neighbor. In particular, economic relations between the two countries could provide a win-win situation for the region and help raise economic prosperity within Syrian society. Additionally, U.S. officials were also sending a stark warning to the Syrian officials that an unstable Iraq had the potential to turn into a theater of sectarian insurgency, leading to the nation's disintegration into different factions.<sup>115</sup>

The priority of the Iraqi border was apparent at each and every phase of the conversations held between U.S. and Syrian officials. Special Coordinator Fred Hof maintains that President Obama held very strong directives about securing the border between Syria and Iraq. President Obama impressed upon Damascus—through envoys, letters, and messages—that any concession, such as easing of sanctions or increased trade would depend on Syrian cooperation on this matter.<sup>116</sup> Cables from the U.S. Embassy in Damascus to Washington, D.C. show that State Department officials were closely watching the coverage of the high-level visits from the U.S. in Syrian newspapers. The cables reveal that U.S. officials were particularly disturbed by the triumphalism emerging in the state-controlled media in the aftermath of the Congressional visit. One cable went so far as to suggest that U.S. officials should support the only private newspaper in Syria by providing talking points in order to amplify Washington's message for the Syrian public.<sup>117</sup>

<sup>115</sup> Andrew Tabler, "Syria Clenches Its Fist," *Foreign Policy*, August 28, 2009, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/08/28/syria\\_clenches\\_its\\_fist](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/08/28/syria_clenches_its_fist).

<sup>116</sup> Anonymous, interview by Kilic Kanat, July 2014.

<sup>117</sup> "Re-engaging Syria: Entering the Syrian Spin," WikiLeaks, Wikileaks Cable 142, February 19, 2009, <https://wikileaks.org/cable/2009/02/09DAMASCUS142.html>.

Despite pressures, FM Moallem reportedly responded dubiously to calls to close the border during the meeting. According to him, the matter was not an issue of political will but rather of the security capacity at the Syrian-Iraqi border. FM Moallem requested that the U.S. provide technical assistance and military equipment, including night vision goggles for the Syrian military. According to some in the State Department, the lack of military equipment was just an excuse for the Syrian regime. They asserted that the reality of Syrian support for the insurgency in Iraq was more complicated and providing military assistance was a wrong step to take. However, President Obama went forward and complied with certain demands put forth by the Syrian regime.<sup>118</sup>

Meanwhile, U.S. intelligence began taking concrete measures to prevent the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq through Syria by investigating source countries in different parts of the world in an effort to create effective cooperation. Through this cooperation, the U.S. was able to effectively block insurgents from source countries before they arrived in Damascus. This led to a dramatic decline in the number of foreign fighters sourced from Damascus. This situation, without much effort by the Syrian regime, decreased the tension between the two countries about insurgents in Iraq.<sup>119</sup> As such, the U.S. introduced a military element to the rapprochement, suggesting the institutionalization of a security program with Iraq to heighten the impregnability of the border.<sup>120</sup> U.S. officials offered to send a delegation from the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) to Damascus in order to discuss the potential for security cooperation.<sup>121</sup> With a little help from Senator Kerry to smooth rocky relations between the two countries, Secretary Clinton and FM Moallem spoke

<sup>118</sup> Anonymous, interview by Kilic Kanat, July 2014.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> "May 7 Feltman-Shapiro Meeting in Damascus: FM Muallim Questions US Commitment to Real Engagement," Wikileaks Cable 335.

<sup>121</sup> "May 7 Feltman-Shapiro Meeting In Damascus: FM Muallim Noncommittal On U.S.-Syrian-Iraqi Security Cooperation," Wikileaks, Wikileaks Cable 342, May 14, 2009, <http://cables.mrkva.eu/cable.php?id=206976>.

over the phone in June to set a timetable for visits by the CENTCOM delegation and Special Envoy George Mitchell.<sup>122</sup>

On June 12, 2009, the delegation from CENTCOM visited Damascus to discuss border security as well as attempts to stop the flow of foreign fighters. During meetings, the possibility of creating specific mechanisms for a joint effort to sustain a peaceful border between Syria and Iraq was heavily discussed.<sup>123</sup> The CENTCOM delegation proposed a trilateral border monitoring group with Syria and Iraq to encourage burden-sharing and improve relations between the countries. The proposal included joint assessments of several critical Syrian-Iraqi border crossings and the formation of a working group aimed at providing border security.<sup>124</sup>

A follow up meeting between the parties took place in August. The CENTCOM delegation, joined by high-ranking civilian officials, again proposed to begin a joint assessment of the border postings, providing a clear timetable for the task. Syrian officials agreed to discuss the matter but obstinately resisted yielding concessions, believing that they should be rewarded with a high-level diplomatic visit or the restoration of the U.S. ambassador merely for agreeing to the talks.<sup>125</sup> However, following the talks, the parties reached a tentative agreement to form a tripartite committee. Soon afterward, Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki of Iraq visited Damascus in order to seal the tripartite agreement for border security.<sup>126</sup> High expectations surrounded PM Maliki's meeting with Assad, which had the potential to facilitate a smooth execution of U.S. goals in Iraq. However, the debate proved moot as bad blood between Syria and Iraq ultimately poisoned the deal. Historically, Syrians distrusted PM Maliki, and Iraqis

<sup>122</sup> David Ignatius, "Breakthrough with Syria," *Real Clear Politics*, June 3, 2009, [http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2009/06/03/breakthrough\\_with\\_syria\\_96789.html](http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2009/06/03/breakthrough_with_syria_96789.html).

<sup>123</sup> "Border Security: U.S. Delegation Takes First Step with Sarg," WikiLeaks, Wikileaks Cable 426, June 21, 2009, <http://cables.mrkva.eu/cable.php?id=213187>.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> "Codel Kaudman-President Assad Meeting May 28," WikiLeaks, Wikileaks Cable 337, May 29, 2009, <http://wikileaks.ch/cable/2009/05/09DAMASCUS377.html>.

<sup>126</sup> Tabler, "Syria Clenches Its Fist."

held contempt for Syria's support of exiled Baathists. Yet any hope of a security deal shattered when bombs exploded in Baghdad in August 2009, and Iraqi officials immediately accused the Syrian government of harboring those responsible for the attacks. Iraqi PM Maliki demanded that Damascus surrender two ex-Baathists; Syria withheld and simultaneously implemented a strong border control to block the flow of fighters entering Iraq from its territory. Later, the crisis deepened when the Iraqi government broadcast a video of a confession of an al-Qaeda fighter who claimed to be trained by Syrian intelligence in Syria.<sup>127</sup> When the Syrian regime refused to extradite the two former Baathists without concrete evidence of their guilt, Baghdad withdrew its ambassador from Damascus. This decision had an adverse impact on the relations between the two countries, and destabilized the tripartite arrangement.<sup>128</sup> Several different explosions in Baghdad followed this episode, further straining relations. After a series of bombings on October 25 in Baghdad, new allegations emerged about the role of the former Iraqi Baathists operating freely in Damascus. Although denied by the Syrian regime, the Iraqi Foreign Ministry as well as Iraqi embassy officials in Damascus stated that they had witnessed the free movement of former regime elements in Syrian cities.<sup>129</sup>

By September 2009, the administration recognized that the trilateral discussions were dead in the water and began to look for a viable alternative to demonstrate Washington's commitment to its relationship with Syria beyond security cooperation, chiefly through water management, law enforcement reform and NGO development. The assumption held by U.S. officials was that Washington could entice Assad's government

<sup>127</sup> Christopher M. Blanchard, Kenneth Katzman, Carol Migdalovitz and Jeremy Sharp, "Iraq: Regional Perspectives and U.S. Policy," *Congressional Research Services*, October 6, 2009, <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33793.pdf>.

<sup>128</sup> Mona Yacoubian, "Syria and the New Iraq: Between Rivalry and Rapprochement in Iraq," in *Iraq, Its Neighbors, and the United States: Competition, Crisis, and Reordering of Power*, eds. Henry J. Barkey, Scott B. Lasensky, and Phebe Marr. (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2011).

<sup>129</sup> "Iraqi Embassy Reports Worsening Syrian Iraqi Relations," WikiLeaks, Wikileaks Cable 820, November 24, 2009, <https://wikileaks.org/cable/2009/11/09DAMASCUS820.html>.

to cooperate by engaging with it in areas of technical interest to boost “routine interaction.” Conversations about “dangling” the prospect of fewer sanctions and greater public diplomatic engagement were also under consideration. In fact, six months after its first interaction with the Syrian government, the Obama administration began strategizing for the next six months. Preparation included diving into issues less related to military and security and more at the diplomatic-level. However, the plan also made it clear that the priorities of the administration, particularly the foreign fighter dilemma, remained at the top of the agenda. The Middle East Peace Process and the nuclear dossier came only after this significant issue.<sup>130</sup> As part of the continuation of diplomatic engagement, Deputy FM Faisal Miqdad visited Washington, D.C. for meetings in September. This was the first time a Syrian envoy had visited Washington in eight years. That said, the parties failed to reach a consensus about the steps needed for the first phase of further negotiations between Syria and the U.S.

#### MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS

The Syrian-Israeli track of the peace process collapsed in 2000, and was subsequently totally abandoned, especially following the Second Intifada that year. Tensions between Tel Aviv and Damascus further increased when Israel targeted Palestinian units inside Syria in 2003 during the Ain es Saheb airstrikes. It was the first of such attacks inside Syria since the end of the October War in 1973. Meanwhile, U.S. support for the Israeli attacks strained the already fragile relations between the U.S. and Syria. In the aftermath of the Israeli offense, President Bush justified the attacks as self-defense, stating that the U.S. would itself resort to the same strategy to deal with potential threats in Syria.<sup>131</sup> These developments damaged the prospects of Israeli-Syrian relations, specifically the peace process, and

<sup>130</sup> “Re-engaging Syria: Toward a Six-Month Plan,” WikiLeaks, WikiLeaks Cable 671, September 10, 2009, <http://www.dazzlepod.com/cable/09DAMASCUS671?q=09damascus671>.

<sup>131</sup> International Crisis Group, “Engaging Syria? U.S. Constraints and Opportunities.”

degraded U.S. policy in the region.<sup>132</sup> This issue became increasingly peripheral to U.S. foreign policy.

During the Israel-Lebanon War in 2006, the crisis between Damascus and Tel Aviv reached an even higher level. In several instances, Syrian officials signaled that Syria might enter the war on Hezbollah's side. They also allowed the Iranian government to provide supplies for Hezbollah forces through Syrian territory. Negotiations between Syria and Israel restarted with the mediation of Turkey. This was significant in two ways. On the one hand, it was considered the first major step towards the resolution of the problem since the Clinton administration's attempted to mediate the dispute. On the other hand, the negotiations created a potential resolution to Syria's isolation from the international community. According to some, the negotiations between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Assad were not completely welcomed by the Bush administration. In fact, President Bush discouraged PM Olmert from resuming negotiations with Syria until the Assad regime implemented the steps outlined by the U.S. government. The Assad regime had signaled at different instances that it was willing to renew the negotiations under the mediation of the United States, but the Bush administration ignored these invitations. Despite Washington's opposition for the launching of this process, negotiations were announced in May 2008 and the U.S. was not able denounce or oppose it.<sup>133</sup> Ultimately, this process was unable reach its final goal of generating a long-term and sustainable peace between Syria and Israel because it was interrupted with the start of Operation Cast Lead by the Israeli Defense Forces in December 2008.

The Obama administration viewed its engagement with Syria as a way to reinvigorate the stalled Middle East Peace negotiations. The aftermath of the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel left the region incredibly

<sup>132</sup> Itamar Rabinovich, "Damascus, Jerusalem, and Washington: The Syrian-Israeli Relationship as a U.S. Policy Issue," Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, Analysis Paper no. 19 (March 2009).

<sup>133</sup> International Crisis Group, "Engaging Syria? U.S. Constraints and Opportunities."

unstable. Israel felt threatened in facing an unconventional challenge from a non-state group; Hezbollah was better equipped militarily and more politically involved in the region than the Lebanese state; and Iran began more aggressively pursuing its nuclear program. By courting Syria, U.S. and Israeli officials believed that they could diminish Assad's alliance with Iran and Hezbollah and in turn blunt their influence.<sup>134</sup> The renewed interest in the MEP Israel-Syria track would serve to demonstrate a strong U.S. resolve and improve U.S. credibility in other areas of involvement in the Middle East. President Obama first signaled his intention to deal with this issue in his Cairo Speech in June 2009. Both his statements on the peace process and on the future of U.S.-Middle East relations signaled a new era for U.S. policy toward the region.

Syria, both in its previous messages as well as during early contacts with the Obama administration, expressed its readiness to work with the U.S. on the MEP talks. In conversations with Senator John Kerry in February 2009, Assad indicated his willingness to cooperate on the MEP initiative, calling the U.S.' stance on the matter "Syria's most important concern."<sup>135</sup> In the following days, Assad became more vocal about relations with Israel. For instance, he offered a "cold peace" to Israel and requested U.S. mediation in order to resolve the dispute between Syria and Israel. In these statements, he also suggested that a direct line of communication between President Obama and himself would be more constructive in the resolution of several problems between the countries.<sup>136</sup> During a May 2009 U.S. congressional visit to Damascus, Assad made it clear that he was anxious to make peace with Israel: "If we don't achieve something now while

<sup>134</sup> Isabel Kershner, "Secret Israel-Syria Peace Talks Involved Golan Heights Exit," *The New York Times*, October 12, 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/13/world/middleeast/secret-israel-syria-peace-talks-involved-golan-heights-exit.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/13/world/middleeast/secret-israel-syria-peace-talks-involved-golan-heights-exit.html?_r=0).

<sup>135</sup> "Senator Kerry: Syria Willing to Help Achieve Palestinian Unity," *Haaretz*, February 21, 2009, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/senator-kerry-syria-willing-to-help-achieve-palestinian-unity-1.270630>; See also "Kerry - Assad: Dividing Iraq and Unifying Iran," Wikileaks Cable 160.

<sup>136</sup> Tabler, *In the Lion's Den*, 222-223.

Obama is President, it will be difficult in the future.”<sup>137</sup> Seymour Hersh, in an article in *New Yorker*, also emphasized Assad’s position. According to him “in his email after the Gaza War, Assad emphasized that it was more than ever “essential that the United States play a prominent and active role in the peace process.” What he needed, Assad said, was direct contact with President Obama; a conference would not be enough. “It is most natural to want a meeting with President Obama,” he maintained<sup>138</sup> Although it was well known that the Assad regime was eager to reclaim the Golan Heights in order to satisfy a decades-long political promise and boost domestic support, according to some analysts like Joshua Landis, the main objective of Assad was different in this case. Landis argued “My guess is that Syria will grudgingly go down the road of accepting U.S. sponsored reconciliation with Israel — not because it believes Israel will give it a pot of gold – the Golan, but rather, in the hope that the United States will shell out some trinkets. The trinkets will be the easing of U.S. sanctions and more normalized relations with Washington, normal enough that is, that other nations will be able to trade and invest in Syria without inhibition.”<sup>139</sup> This strategy were also discussed by different branches of the U.S. administration. Though U.S. State Department officials questioned whether “the carrot of a Golan track will be an effective incentive” to encourage Syria to change other aspects of its foreign policy, the administration ultimately decided to push forward with negotiations in 2010.<sup>140</sup>

Though not considered a priority, the Obama administration still placed the peace process on its foreign policy agenda. Although the most public and debated dimension of the process was the Palestinian-Israeli track, many members of the administration considered the Syrian-Israeli track to be just as important as a prerequisite for the stability of the Middle

<sup>137</sup> Codel Kaufman-President Assad Meeting May 28,” Wikileaks Cable 377.

<sup>138</sup> Seymour Hersh, “Syria Calling,”

<sup>139</sup> Landis, Joshua, “Ire over US Sanctions Causes Poicy Review in Damascus,” *Syria Comment*, May 13, 2009, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/page/101/>

<sup>140</sup> “Kerry - Assad: Dividing Iraq and Unifying Iran,” Wikileaks Cable 160.

East. During the rapprochement with Syria, the Obama administration considered the possibility of a sustainable peace deal between Syria and Israel that would contribute to the stabilization of politics in the region. Special Envoy George Mitchell and Special Coordinator Fred Hof made multiple trips to Damascus during this period. For the Syrian government, Special Envoy Mitchell's visit was particularly anticipated. The fact that he had skipped Damascus on his first Middle East tour had been a huge disappointment in Syria. After the meeting with Assad, Special Envoy Mitchell's tone echoed his position in past meetings with Syrian officials. He stated that reinstating negotiations between Syria and Israel was one of the near-term goals of the U.S. and that President Obama was determined to facilitate comprehensive peace in the region. He also underscored that U.S.-Syrian relations were pivotal in providing ground for a more constructive role for the Syrian government in the region.<sup>141</sup>

A month after this visit, on July 26, Special Envoy Mitchell made a follow up trip to Damascus to hold a second round of talks with Assad. After the meetings, Special Envoy Mitchell stated, once again, that both Syria and the U.S. were committed to providing a comprehensive peace that would contribute to stability and security in the region.<sup>142</sup> Though Special Envoy Mitchell did not illuminate which specific topics were debated, he claimed that the United States was "trying to develop...bilateral issues that we have with the Syrians" and noted, "[T]he United States is committed to a dialogue based on mutual interest and mutual respect and a solid foundation for discussion of our shared goals and of real differences, where they occur."<sup>143</sup> Purportedly, these shared goals included counterterrorism and stability in Iraq as well as progress in the peace process.<sup>144</sup>

During this period, a cable from Damascus to Washington, D.C. was

<sup>141</sup> "Mitchel Cites Syria's Role in Mideast Peace Efforts," *The New York Times*, June 13, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/14/world/middleeast/14mitchell.html>.

<sup>142</sup> "Obama's Middle East Envoy Steps Up Diplomatic Push in Syria."

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> "Kerry - Assad: Improving the U.S.-Syria Relationship," WikiLeaks Cable 160.

leaked that discussed the status of Turkish-Syrian relations. The document revealed that the U.S. was worried about the possible adverse effects of improved Syrian-Turkish relations on Washington's influence over Damascus as well as on an emerging peace process. It goes on to suggest that Turkish criticisms towards Israeli policies aided the Syrian government by emboldening the regime and eliminating the incentive for Syria to halt its relations with groups such as Hezbollah or to distance itself from Iran. Furthermore, increasing Turkish support for Syria was reducing the prospect for achieving peace in the region. According to the cable, "Turkey's methodical deepening of relations with Damascus offers Syria a strategic buffer against international pressure and a ready mediator willing to help Syria mend strained relations with neighbors... At the moment, the SARG is seeking to characterize Turkish-Israeli tensions as a show of Turkish solidarity with Syria and Palestinians."<sup>145</sup> The cable continues:

"While the US and Turkey generally share the same overriding objectives of regional comprehensive peace and stability, Turkish officials here stiffen when we broach the possibility of closer US-Turkish cooperation to influence Syria on specific issues (e.g., Iran or Lebanon). Given Ankara's jealous approach to Syria, one that applies equally to French and EU efforts to engage Damascus, our challenge is to nudge the deepening of Syrian-Turkish relations toward strategic Syrian choices necessary for achieving shared objectives, even if we differ with Ankara on tactical approaches."<sup>146</sup>

U.S. officials working on the Syria portfolio were also mentioned in the same cable as arguing that Turkey was the best hope for the U.S. to keep Syria away from Iran.

There was a serious discussion within the U.S. administration if mending ties with Syria would produce the desired distancing of ties between Syria and Iran. This issue had been raised earlier by past members of the U.S. administrations. For instance, Martin Indyk was quoted in Seymour Hersh's article on Syria writing in his memoirs that "There is a deep diver-

<sup>145</sup> "Turkish Support Emboldens Assad But Provides Best Hope for Coaxing Syria from Iran," Wikileaks, Wikileaks Cable 759, October 28, 2009, <https://wikileaks.org/cable/2009/10/09DAMASCUS759.html>.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

gence between Iran and Syria, captured in the fact that at the same time as Iran's president threatens to wipe Israel off the map, his Syrian ally is attempting to make peace with Israel... Should negotiations yield a peace agreement, it would likely cause the breakup of the Iranian-Syrian axis."<sup>147</sup> According to Hersh, Indyk also suggested similar things to him during their interviews. According to Hersh, Indyk answered a question about this "linkage" by saying that "It will not be easy for him to break with Hezbollah, Hamas and Iran, but he cannot get a peace deal unless he does. But, if he feels that things are moving in the Middle East, he will not want to be left behind."<sup>148</sup> Other analysts, such as Howard Scheweber also put forward similar arguments According to Scheweber, "relations with Syria are the key. Here's just one reason: if Syria can be brought on board with a peace effort, Iran no longer has direct supply lines into Lebanon. Meanwhile, Syria has itself been supporting Hamas in Gaza (hence its role in negotiating the release of Shalit) as well as meddling in Lebanon. But while Syria has been notoriously difficult to deal with in the past, there is no reason in principle why progress cannot be made. Assad is an opportunist, not a mad ideologue, and certainly not a religious fanatic."<sup>149</sup>

While the U.S. was planning to engage in peace negotiations and bring the parties to the table, several developments generated renewed crisis in the region. One such event was the November 2009 Israeli military seizure of a cargo ship in the Mediterranean Sea. The vessel was allegedly carrying nearly 600 tons of weapons from Iran bound for Hezbollah militants through Syria. This raid led to mutual accusations from both sides. In a televised statement, FM Muallem called the Israeli commandos conduct-

<sup>147</sup> Hersh, Seymour M., "Syria Calling: The Obama Administration's chance to engage in a Middle East peace," *The New Yorker*, April 6, 2009, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/04/06/syria-calling>

<sup>148</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> Scheweber, Howard, "Iran and the Syrian Gambit," *Huffington Post*, May 25, 2011, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/howard-scheweber/iran-and-the-syrian-gambi\\_b\\_221505.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/howard-scheweber/iran-and-the-syrian-gambi_b_221505.html)

ing the raid pirates and denied that the ship was carrying weapons.<sup>150</sup> Efforts to contain the crisis followed in December 2009 in the form of a visit to Damascus by Fred Hof, the Special Coordinator for Regional Affairs. Special Coordinator Hof met with Syrian FM Muallem who, despite the crisis, repeated Syria's willingness to engage in peace talks with Israel. According to a cable about the meeting, FM Muallem stated that U.S. involvement in direct negotiations launched with the facilitation of Turkey was a "practical necessity." However, in order for the U.S. to be considered an honest broker by the Syrian side, FM Muallem requested improvements in U.S.-Syrian bilateral relations. As a first step to reignite relations and as a sign of U.S. goodwill, FM Muallem proposed that the U.S. allow the Qatari government to transfer an Airbus 340 to Syria.<sup>151</sup>

Later in 2010, Tel Aviv and Damascus engaged in a heated debate over the peace process, directing threats against one another. First, during a visit by the Spanish Foreign Minister, Assad told reporters that Israel was not serious about achieving peace, and that in fact, the policies of the Israeli government were pushing the region to war. Following this statement, FM Moallem said that Israel should not test the determination of Syria and threatened to move the war to Israeli cities. Immediately following these statements, Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman warned the Syrian government that in any war with Israel, the Assad family would lose power. He claimed, "I think that our message must be clear to Assad. In the next war not only will you lose, you and your family will lose the regime. Neither will you remain in power, nor the Assad family."<sup>152</sup> Although such statements were common occurrences between the two countries, the fact that they came during a time when President Obama and the U.S. government

<sup>150</sup> Charles Levinson and Josh Mitnick, "Israeli Navy Seizes Weapons Believed to be for Hezbollah," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 5, 2009, <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB125732536158927651>.

<sup>151</sup> "Special Coordinator Hof's December 16 Meeting with FM Muallim," Wikileaks, Wikileaks Cable 868, <https://wikileaks.org/cable/2009/12/09DAMASCUS868.html>.

<sup>152</sup> Isabel Kershner, "Israeli Minister Adds Heat to Exchange With Syria," *The New York Times*, February 4, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/05/world/middleeast/05mideast.html>.

were trying to mediate between the two countries created tension not only between Syria and Israel, but also in U.S. relations with both nations.

From the fall of 2010 up until the spring of 2011, the White House tasked Special Coordinator Fred Hof and Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for the Central Region Dennis Ross with engaging in shuttle diplomacy between Damascus and Tel Aviv, which began at a time when the Palestinian peace track was at a standstill.<sup>153</sup> This process was kept very quiet; outside the White House, only a handful of top State Department officials were kept abreast of the program's progress.<sup>154</sup> Discussions were largely predicated on Israel's withdrawal from the Golan Heights in exchange for a Syrian disengagement from Iran.<sup>155</sup> The meetings never reached the finely detailed stage of determining the demarcation of the border, the timeline for Israeli troop withdrawal, and exact security arrangements.<sup>156</sup> Still, American officials indicated that negotiators were rapidly approaching an agreement. Reportedly, Special Assistant Ross told the administration that Syria was willing to limit its communication with Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas, give up its claims to the Sea of Galilee and work with the U.S. on counterterrorism issues. In return, Israel reportedly agreed to return the Golan Heights, cooperate on water issues and normalize relations with Syria by exchanging ambassadors immediately.<sup>157</sup> Officials entered the spring of 2011 quite optimistic about the status of the Israel-Syria track of the MEP negotiations.

#### NON-PROLIFERATION

Another dimension of U.S. policy towards Syria at this time entailed

<sup>153</sup> Kershner, "Secret Israel-Syria Peace Talks Involved Golan Heights Exit."

<sup>154</sup> Anonymous, interview by Kilic Kanat, July 2014.

<sup>155</sup> Kershner, "Secret Israel-Syria Peace Talks Involved Golan Heights Exit."

<sup>156</sup> Aluf Benn, "Assad's Israeli Friend," *Haaretz*, March 28, 2013, <http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/assad-s-israeli-friend.premium-1.512146>;

<sup>157</sup> Anonymous, interview by Kilic Kanat, July 2014.; See also Tabler, *In the Lion's Den* and "Report: U.S. in secret talks with Syria over peace accord with Israel," *Haaretz*, January 1, 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/report-u-s-in-secret-talks-with-syria-over-peace-accord-with-israel-1.334635>.

the issue of controlling weapons of mass destruction. This was a significant element of U.S. foreign policy, both for its overall international security strategy as well as for its policy toward the Middle East, in particular its relations with countries seen as contributing to proliferation. Even before becoming president, President Obama had outlined his vision of international security and politics in a commentary in *Foreign Affairs*, stating that the nuclear non-proliferation and elimination of weapons of mass destruction program would be a significant part of his foreign policy. According to him, “America must lead a global effort to secure all nuclear weapons and material at vulnerable sites within four years—the most effective way to prevent terrorists from acquiring a bomb.”<sup>158</sup> Later in his inauguration speech, his message to regimes about unclenching their fists was considered a message to Iran to terminate its nuclear program. Some elements of the U.S.’s rapprochement with Syria had to do with the Obama administration’s decision to deal with nuclear weapons. Solving the Syrian nuclear problem would be considered a first step and a test case to deal with the nuclear program of Iran. Those in the bureaucracy who wanted the U.S. to fix its relations with Syria also benefitted from this argument and considered the resolution of the nuclear issue a significant part of the package.

The nuclear issue and non-proliferation efforts were less public yet still important avenues for greater cooperation between the U.S. and Syria. The IAEA had been hounding Syria since the existence of the al-Kibar nuclear facility near Deir al-Zour became public knowledge in 2007. Reports alleged that the government built the facility with help from North Korea in order to produce nuclear weapons. The facility was destroyed by Israeli airstrikes the same year but IAEA tests in 2008, only begrudgingly allowed by Syria following a failed effort to conceal the evidence, still detected a high-level of chemically processed uranium in the soil. After this discovery, the IAEA was barred from conducting any more investi-

<sup>158</sup> Barack Obama, “Renewing American Leadership,” *Foreign Affairs* 86, No. 4 (July/August 2007), <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/62636/barack-obama/renewing-american-leadership>

gations.<sup>159</sup> As such, Syria joined its ally Iran on the IAEA's blacklist, especially after the IAEA announced in 2011 that there was evidence Syria intended to produce weapons.<sup>160</sup>

The State Department believed that engaging Syria on a non-proliferation track might prove to be a promising track of U.S.-Syrian cooperation. However, the impact of the Israeli strikes generated an increasing degree of skepticism on the part of the Syrian government about any further cooperation with any Western country on the issue of its nuclear program. In order to overcome this impasse, the U.S. offered to conduct a "special inspection" of nuclear sites and assist Syria. The offer was not stated very vocally. In fact, the non-proliferation issue had never proved to be central to the bilateral relationship—that is, until Ambassador-Designate Robert Ford raised the concept in his confirmation hearing in March 2010.<sup>161</sup> After stating that Syria had so far refused to cooperate with international organizations in regards to their policies on the nuclear issue, Ambassador Ford emphasized the significance of continued engagement. He stated that "I do not think that the Syrians will change their policies quickly. Finding avenues of cooperation with Syria will be a step-by-step process that will require patience and steady commitment to our principles. And the Syrians could be very helpful if they perceive how their interests are best served by working with us and the international community."<sup>162</sup>

What Ambassador Ford was trying to achieve by raising the nuclear issue was to find an alternative rationale for the restoration of ties with the Syrian government and hence, upgrade diplomatic relations between the two countries to an ambassadorial level.<sup>163</sup> During this process, some thought that the United States should encourage Syria to cooperate with

<sup>159</sup> "Al-Kibar," *NTI*, December 6, 2013, <http://www.nti.org/facilities/461/>.

<sup>160</sup> Tabler, *In the Lion's Den*, 220.

<sup>161</sup> Tabler, *In the Lion's Den*, 240-241.

<sup>162</sup> Ford, Robert, "Statement of Robert Ford Ambassador-Designate to the Syrian Arab Republic," *Senate Committee on Foreign Relations*, March 16, 2010, <http://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FordTestimony100316a1.pdf>

<sup>163</sup> Anonymous, interview by Kilic Kanat, July 2014.

the IAEA to abate the agency's onerous demands or else risk losing its recent warm reception from the international community. Others believed Syria might move on the Arab-Israeli process to distract the international community from the investigation.<sup>164</sup> Either way, increased engagement on non-proliferation would underscore President Obama's stated foreign policy goal of non-proliferation, isolate Syria's ally Iran, and act as a confidence-building measure between the United States and Syria.

In 2010, the State Department quietly began negotiations on this matter Assad initially rejected the notion of such engagement and warned diplomats not to put him "in (Iran's) nuclear basket (*sic*)."<sup>165</sup> He made it difficult for U.S. officials when he invited Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Hasan Nasrallah for a banquet to demonstrate that there was "no space between Syria and Iran."<sup>166</sup> Despite such public relations nightmares, those closest to Ambassador Ford reported that he made great progress on the issue of non-proliferation, though details still lacked as to what such progress entailed.<sup>167</sup> Officials remained optimistic about negotiations with Syria in the months leading up to the Arab Spring.

Between 2010 and the outbreak of the Arab Spring, despite some setbacks, relations between Syria and the U.S. steadily improved. In February 2010, President Obama announced that Ambassador Ford would be his choice for Ambassador to Syria. In the same month, Undersecretary of State William Burns met with Assad in Damascus and stated that it was a very useful meeting for both sides, demonstrating a level of enthusiasm for the future of bilateral relations.<sup>168</sup> More significantly, Syrian Intelligence Chief General Ali Mamlouk joined some of the meetings. Accord-

<sup>164</sup> Andrew Tabler, "How to React to a Reactor," *Foreign Affairs*, April 19, 2014, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/66214/andrew-j-tabler/how-to-react-to-a-reactor>.

<sup>165</sup> "Kerry - Assad: Improving the U.S.-Syria Relationship," Wikileaks Cable 160.

<sup>166</sup> Tabler, *In the Lion's Den*, 228-229.

<sup>167</sup> Anonymous, interview by Kilic Kanat, July 2014.

<sup>168</sup> Khaled Yacoub Oweise, "Syria's Assad holds security talks with U.S. official," *Reuters*, February 17, 2010, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/02/17/us-syria-usa-burns-idUSTRE61G32Z20100217>.

ing to a cable from the U.S. Embassy in Damascus, General Mamlouk signaled that the U.S. and Syria could cooperate not only to provide border security between Iraq and Syria, but also to discover other potential aspects of a security partnership in different realms in the Middle East. During the meeting, he also reportedly suggested the necessity of cooperation between Syria and the U.S. on intelligence and security.<sup>169</sup> However, the Obama administration kept the details of the meetings confidential, avoiding any premature statements about the future of relations. During a hearing in the Senate, Secretary Clinton responded questions about the prospects of relations with Syria with the list of several items serving as the backbone of the negotiations. She stated, "Just recently, Undersecretary Bill Burns had very intense, substantive talks in Damascus, and we have laid out for the Syrians the need for greater cooperation with respect to Iraq, the end to interference in Lebanon, and the transport or provision of weapons to Hezbollah, a resumption of the Israeli-Syrian track on the peace process, which had been proceeding through the offices of the Turks the last years, and generally, to begin to move away from the relationship with Iran, which is so deeply troubling to the region as well as to the United States. There are many specifics under each of those big-ticket items that we have discussed with the Syrians, and we are going to resume ambassadorial-level representation, but these issues have to be addressed continually."<sup>170</sup> Probably among the most significant of these items was the reference to Iran and the U.S.'s willingness to keep Syria away from Iran. A day after this statement, during a meeting with President Ahmadinejad, Assad declared that there was no distance between Iran and Syria, to the public dismay of Washington.<sup>171</sup>

<sup>169</sup> "Syrian Intelligence Chief Attends CT Dialogue with S/CT Bejamin," Wikileaks, Wikileaks Cable 159, <https://wikileaks.org/cable/2010/02/10DAMASCUS159.html>.

<sup>170</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, Testimony before the Senate Appropriation Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs, *President's Proposed Budget Request for FY2011 for the Department of State and Foreign Operations*, Hearing, February 24, 2010, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/02/137227.htm>.

<sup>171</sup> Tabler, *In the Lion's Den*, 228-229.

The diplomatic thaw continued following these developments. In March 2010, a hearing was conducted at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on the nomination of Robert Ford for Syria. During this meeting, Ambassador Ford listed five main issues that would constitute the administration's agenda in Syria: 1) getting Syria to be helpful in stabilizing Iraq; 2) getting Syria to stop helping terrorist groups and to be more respectful of Lebanese sovereignty; 3) securing Syria's support for the peace process; 4) securing the Syrian government's cooperation with the IAEA; 5) encouraging greater respect for human rights in Syria.<sup>172</sup> It was an ambitious set of priorities and Ambassador Ford was cautious in responding to questions, avoiding raising expectations about the future of relations. During the hearing, he underlined the significance of changing the relations between Syria and Iran. He stated, "While we and our friends in the region are working to mitigate Iran's influence, Syria has helped promote Iran's destabilizing policies...I do not think that the Syrians will change their policies quickly. Finding avenues of cooperation with Syria will be a step-by-step process that will require patience and steady commitment to our principles."<sup>173</sup> Following this, Senator Kerry, who was chairing the Senate Foreign Relations Committee during Ambassador Ford's hearing, visited Damascus to meet with Assad.

Amidst the diplomatic thaw, tensions also surfaced as a direct result of several steps taken by Syria. In April 2010, the Israeli government accused the Syrian regime of delivering SCUD missiles to Hezbollah. According to Israeli officials, these were accurate long-range missiles, which could put Israeli cities in grave danger. Although Syria strongly denied these accusations, Republican Senators signaled that they would delay the confirmation of Ambassador Ford if the SCUDS were really transferred from Syria to

<sup>172</sup> Senate Foreign Relations Committee, *Ambassador to Syria Nomination Hearing*, Hearing, March 16, 2010, Available online at: <http://www.c-span.org/video/?292552-1/ambassador-syria-nomination-hearing>.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*

Hezbollah.<sup>174</sup> Following this threat, the State Department released a statement condemning any transfer of arms, especially ballistic missiles from Syria to Hezbollah. Soon after, Syrian officials were summoned by the State Department to request an explanation for concerns raised by the Israeli government.<sup>175</sup> Later in a statement Feltman defended the decision of President Obama to continue its engagement with Syria. He stated that the Obama administration believes diplomacy can influence Syria's behavior and said "An ambassador is not a reward; it's a tool." According to him, just like its relations with the leaders of Iran and Hezbollah, Syria's president also needed to have some form of relationship with the Obama administration.<sup>176</sup>

Once again, the Obama administration continued the rapprochement with Syria. Shortly after the crisis over the SCUD missiles, Feltman attended a subsequent congressional hearing and highlighted the necessity of continuing to restoring diplomatic relations with Syria. He claimed that rebuilding relations with Syria was particularly important to stabilize a region where U.S. men and women were actively serving. Feltman argued his country should utilize all assets at its disposal to convey messages about certain issues directly to the Syrian regime.<sup>177</sup> Shortly after, Secretary Clinton clarified the necessity for the U.S. to continue diplomatic engagement with Syria. She noted that this engagement was not a form of reward for the Syrian regime.<sup>178</sup> Until the official appointment of the U.S. Ambassador to Damascus in January 2011, these diplomatic interactions continued between the two countries. Despite little improvement in these critical issue areas, the Obama administration opted for the continuation of rapprochement with Syria.

<sup>174</sup> Ethan Bronner, "Israel Says Syria Gave Missiles to Hezbollah," *The New York Times*, April 14, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/15/world/middleeast/15israel.html?adxnsl=1&adxnnlx=1416157255-Inhe9kK6dxNFqzUR+N37dA>.

<sup>175</sup> Mark Landler, "U.S. Speaks to Syrian Envoy of Arms Worries," *The New York Times*, April 19, 2010, [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/20/world/middleeast/20syria.html?\\_r=2&](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/20/world/middleeast/20syria.html?_r=2&).

<sup>176</sup> <http://www.haaretz.com/news/u-s-defends-syria-envoy-plan-despite-reports-of-scud-transfer-1.284639>

<sup>177</sup> Sharp, "Syria: Background and U.S. Relations," 8.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

On the eve of the revolutions in the Middle East, President Obama worked within his administration's centralized structure of decision-making while still engaging in a deliberative process with his cabinet and national security staff in order to craft U.S. policy on Syria.<sup>179</sup> Through this consultation, the administration was able to secure the endorsement of all key players in the government for diplomatic engagement.<sup>180</sup> The only significant exception of this process was witnessed in the beginning of direct communication with Syrian officials. Some State Department officials were concerned about the possible perception of the U.S.'s attempt to mend ties with Damascus by the Syrian regime. According to them, the Syrian regime, from the outset, was cooperating only to gain some legitimacy and to relieve itself from economic sanctions. They were also certain that the Syrian regime held a dishonest position on border security between Syria and Iraq. Moreover, they were convinced that the Syrian government would turn this rapprochement into a sort of a triumph and were skeptical about whether the Assad regime would fulfill its promises.<sup>181</sup> In addition, there were some groups within U.S. that were also unhappy with rapprochement between Syria and the U.S. Joshua Landis in his blog wrote that "The Neocon anti-Syrians are coming out in full force in an effort to stop engagement between Syria and the U.S. The pretext is the Iraqi dust up with Damascus over the car bombings in Baghdad last month. Maliki accused Syria of protecting the perpetrators and has demanded Syria hand over a list of ex-Baathist officials living in Syria. Damascus responded that there is no proof of the Iraqi accusations. Syrian officials claim that far from trying to destabilize Iraq, they have every interest in helping to stabilize it now that

<sup>179</sup> For more detail on President Obama's management style, see James Pfiffner, "Decision Making in the Obama White House," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* (June 2011), GMU School of Public Policy Research Paper No. 2011-13.

<sup>180</sup> Schenker, David, "Who Decides on the Levant in Washington?," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, October 6, 2009, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/who-decides-on-the-levant-in-washington>

<sup>181</sup> Anonymus, interview by Kilic Kanat, July 2014.

American troops are on the way out.”<sup>182</sup> This resistance later manifested itself during the appointment hearing of Ambassador Ford. However, at the insistence of the officials at the higher echelons of the administration, most naysayers acquiesced to the process. The avid involvement of the Secretary of State and her deputies, the National Security Council (NSC), and even the Senate, as represented by Senator Kerry, demonstrated President Obama's willingness to encourage the creative development of policy to achieve U.S. objectives.<sup>183</sup>

The independent reports about the U.S.- Syria relations also raised some significant degree of skepticism about the future of the relations. The ICG expressed the necessity for caution in the improvement of relations in a two part report. It was stated that:

“President Obama's effort to re-engage was always going to be a painstaking and arduous task of overcoming a legacy of mutual mistrust. Syrian doubters have their counterparts in Damascus, who are convinced Washington never will truly accept that the Arab nation can play a central regional role. The administration's slow and cautious moves are not necessarily a bad thing. There is need for patience and realism. The region is too unstable for Damascus to move abruptly; relaxation of U.S. sanctions is tied to Syrian policies toward Hamas and Hizbollah that are hostage to a breakthrough with Israel for which conditions do not seem ripe. Neither side is ready for a leap, and both have domestic and foreign skeptics with whom to contend.

But the pace is less worrying than the direction. The temptation in Washington seems to be to test Syrian goodwill – will it do more to harm the Iraqi insurgency, help President Abbas in Palestine or stabilise Lebanon? On its own, that almost certainly will not succeed. The U.S. is not the only one looking for evidence. So too is Syria – for proof that the risks it takes will be offset by the gains it makes. The region's volatility drives it to caution and to hedge its bets pending greater clarity on where the region is heading and, in particular, what Washington will do.”<sup>184</sup>

<sup>182</sup> Landis, Joshua, “Is the Syrian-US Engagement at an End?” *joshualandis.com*, Thursday, September 17th, 2009 <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/page/93/>

<sup>183</sup> David Ignatius, “Kerry's Unusual Role in Mediating U.S.-Syria Relations,” *The Washington Post*, June 1, 2009, [http://voices.washingtonpost.com/postpartisan/2009/06/\\_the\\_long-stalled\\_us\\_diplomati.html](http://voices.washingtonpost.com/postpartisan/2009/06/_the_long-stalled_us_diplomati.html).

<sup>184</sup> International Crisis Group, “Reshuffling the Cards? (I): Syria's Evolving Strategy,” December 14, 2009 [http://www.crisisgroup.org/-/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/92\\_reshuffling\\_the\\_cards\\_\\_i\\_syria\\_evolving\\_strategy.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/-/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/92_reshuffling_the_cards__i_syria_evolving_strategy.pdf)

The report also recommended some caution in regards to the future trajectory of relations between Syria and U.S.

“A wiser approach would be for the U.S. and Syria to explore together whether some common ground could be found on regional issues. This could test both sides’ intentions, promote their interests and start shaping the Middle East in ways that can reassure Damascus about the future. On Iraq, it may not truly exercise positive influence until genuine progress is made toward internal reconciliation. The U.S. could push in that direction, test Syria’s moves and, with the Iraq government, offer the prospect of stronger economic relations with its neighbour. Syria claims it can press Hamas to moderate views but only if there is real appetite in the U.S. for an end to the Palestinian divide. Both could agree to try to immunise Lebanon from regional conflicts and push it to focus on long-overdue issues of governance. Given the current outlooks and suspicions in Damascus and Washington, these are all long shots. But, with little else in the Middle East looking up, it is a gamble well worth taking.”<sup>185</sup>

In the second part of this report the ICG expressed further caution for the bilateral relations. Accordingly,

“It always was unrealistic to expect that the mere call for or initiation of engagement would overcome years of mistrust, divergent conceptions for the region and conflicting alliances. Right now, a productive process is needed, not immediate, dramatic results. But there is not even that...

The most realistic measure of success is not whether the U.S. and Syria achieve a quick breakthrough. At best, that will take time and will have to await changes in the region and real progress toward Israeli-Syrian peace. The test, rather, is whether they can move the relationship far enough so that it might resist crises that, almost inevitably and always unexpectedly, will arise.”<sup>186</sup>

President Obama’s Syria policy was tested with the emergence and rise of people’s movements in different parts of the Arab world. After the revolutions in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, and the spread of the wave of protests to Yemen and Bahrain, analysts anticipated similar developments in Syria. The Assad regime responded to such speculation very early on by suggesting that the Syrian political and social structures were fundamentally different from those of neighboring countries experiencing revolutions. In both the national and international press, Assad stressed the difference

<sup>185</sup> International Crisis Group, “Reshuffling the Cards? (I): Syria’s Evolving Strategy,”

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*

between Syria and other states in the Middle East. During an interview with *The Wall Street Journal*, Assad stated,

“We have more difficult circumstances than most of the Arab countries but in spite of that Syria is stable. Why? Because you have to be very closely linked to the beliefs of the people. This is the core issue. When there is divergence between your policy and the people's beliefs and interests, you will have this vacuum that creates disturbance. So people do not only live on interests; they also live on beliefs, especially in very ideological areas. Unless you understand the ideological aspect of the region, you cannot understand what is happening.”<sup>187</sup>

Assad's optimism was also mirrored among the members of the U.S. government as the wave of protests were drawing near Syria.

<sup>187</sup> “Interview with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 31, 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052748703833204576114712441122894>.



### **THREE** THE ARAB SPRING THUNDERS THROUGH SYRIA (MARCH 2011-AUGUST 2011)

- ■ The U.S. administration began to think that it could no longer negotiate with Assad.



“The Syrian people have shown their courage in demanding a transition to democracy. President Assad now has a choice: He can lead that transition, or get out of the way.”<sup>188</sup>

*President Obama, May 19, 2011*

The Arab Spring struck at an inopportune time for the Obama Administration, which intended to reorient U.S. foreign policy from the unstable Middle East to the burgeoning markets of the Asia Pacific.<sup>189</sup> Uprisings in the Arab world precluded Obama’s ability to complete that pivot. They also pressured the United States to become more deeply invested in the turmoil economically and politically. By the time the Arab Spring reached Syria in March 2011, the bandwidth of the United States’ foreign policy commitments were stretched thin across North Africa as a result of the previous uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya.<sup>190</sup> In February, the United States had called for its ally, Hosni Mubarak, to “stand down” just days after turmoil struck in Egypt. This call was heeded when Mubarak was forced out of office by the military in mid-February. By mid-March, the United States had done the same for the Libyan leader, Muammar Gadhafi, only this time using its own force to back opposition forces. This

<sup>188</sup> Barack Obama: “Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa,” May 19, 2011 (online by The White House Office of the Press Secretary), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-middle-east-and-north-africa%20>.

<sup>189</sup> Hillary Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century,” *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>.

<sup>190</sup> Anonymous, interview by Kilic Kanat, July 2014.

intervention was conducted via NATO and endorsed by the UN.

When uprisings broke out in Syria in March, the Obama administration approached the situation with greater caution than it had the earlier uprisings. The reluctance to get involved was most tangibly felt via Senator Kerry's approach after the first wave of protests hit Syria. Senator Kerry, who was at that point one of the point men of the Obama administration on Syria, tried to be optimistic about the course of the developments. In an address at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, he said that he still expected Assad to take steps towards political reform and move forward in its engagement with America and its allies. He stated, "my judgment is that Syria will move; Syria will change, as it embraces a legitimate relationship with the United States and the West and economic opportunity that comes with it and the participation that comes with it."<sup>191</sup>

United States restraint toward Syria occurred for several reasons. First, as for many other regional and global actors, Syria was expected to be less susceptible to the Arab Spring because of its social and political structure. After the peaceful transition of power from Hafiz al-Assad to Bashar, many analysts thought that al-Assad the son had completed the Assad family's ultimate consolidation of power and had firm control over the country. After the Hama massacres in 1982 and decades of repression, many did not expect the opposition to organize and oppose Assad's consolidated and seemingly revolution-proof regime.<sup>192</sup>

In the run-up to the first demonstration in Syria, different analyses asserted that Syria would not follow the same trajectory as Egypt. One analysis published in *Time Magazine*, it was stated that:

Middle East watchers, perhaps more hopeful than informed, point to a new facebook page — The Syrian Revolution 2011 — which has garnered

<sup>191</sup> Josh Rogin, "Kerry: It's Time to Give Up on Assad the Reformer," *The Cable* (Foreign Policy blog), May 10, 2011, [http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/05/10/kerry\\_it\\_s\\_time\\_to\\_give\\_up\\_on\\_assad\\_the\\_reformer](http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/05/10/kerry_it_s_time_to_give_up_on_assad_the_reformer).

<sup>192</sup> Stephanie Gaskell, "Interview with Ryan Crocker: Assad will Prevail 'Yard by Bloody Yard,'" *Defense One*, August 5, 2013, <http://www.defenseone.com/threats/2013/08/ryan-crocker-id-go-syria-heartbeat/68132/>.

15,000 fans in the scant week it has existed, as proof that Assad's regime is the next to go. But don't expect the successor of the 47-year-old regime, which he inherited from his father in 2000, to be packing his bags anytime soon. Syria may suffer the same political alienation, economic dislocation and corruption that plagues most of the region's regimes, but its government also holds a unique position that sets it apart from the others: that of a pariah state. Assad's Syria is the only country in the Arab world that is not beholden to Western influence or support.<sup>193</sup>

Another analysis by Bassam Haddad raised similar points about the legitimacy of the regime. He questioned Assad legitimacy on the basis of the government's stance against Israel and the U.S. He also mentioned the fluidity of the situation on the ground, writing:

Discussions of Syria's vulnerability to internal protests often posit Damascus's resistance status to explain why Syria will be spared: i.e., that because of Syria's confrontational stance toward Israel and the United States' brutal policies in the region, the regime enjoys a form of Arab nationalist legitimacy. In particular, Syria's support for Hezbollah and Hamas is considered a unique and legitimate tool for manifesting such confrontation to imperialism. After all, President Bashar al-Assad polls quite well throughout the region compared to other Arab leaders, and enjoys significant popularity among various segments of Syrian society.<sup>194</sup>

Later, in an interview, Assad himself expressed similar viewpoint.:

If you want to make a comparison between what is happening in Egypt and Syria, you have to look from a different point: why is Syria stable, although we have more difficult conditions? Egypt has been supported financially by the United States, while we are under embargo by most countries of the world. We have growth although we do not have many of the basic needs for the people. Despite all that, the people do not go into an uprising. So it is not only about the needs and not only about the reform. It is about the ideology, the beliefs and the cause that you have. There is a difference between having a cause and having a vacuum. So, as I said, we have many things in common but at the same time we have some different things.<sup>195</sup>

<sup>193</sup> Baker, Aryn, "Syria Is Not Egypt, but Might It One Day Be Tunisia?" *Time*, February 4, 2011, <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2046426,00.html>

<sup>194</sup> Haddad, Bassam, "Why Syria Is Unlikely to be Next... for Now," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 9, 2011, [http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/index.cfm?fa=show&article=42936&utm\\_source=Arab+Reform+Bulletin&utm\\_campaign=2ce519be42-ARB+Weekly+%28English%29&utm\\_medium=email](http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/index.cfm?fa=show&article=42936&utm_source=Arab+Reform+Bulletin&utm_campaign=2ce519be42-ARB+Weekly+%28English%29&utm_medium=email)

<sup>195</sup> Interview with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, *The Wall Street Journal*, January 31, 2011, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703833204576114712441122894>

However in the first days of anti-regime demonstrations analysts working on the Syrian issue were in denial that the regime would not remain immune from a mass movement within Syria. According to David Hirst, the “patriotic” and anti-Western rhetoric of Assad may not save him from the coming storm. He stated that, “this argument, advanced by a despot in favour of his own survival, appears almost as delusional as those advanced by others – such as the al-Qaida of Colonel Gaddafi’s bizarre imagining. The patriotic card clearly counts for little with the Syrian public. It is just a diversion from the real issues at stake.”<sup>196</sup>

Syria also lacked, a well-organized opposition. In fact, many opposition groups were monitored by the extremely effective *mukhabarat* services.<sup>197</sup> Particularly, State Department officials were skeptical about the capabilities of the opposition and some were even unwilling to engage these groups, who reminded them of the role that Ahmed Chalabi had played before the invasion of Iraq. According to these officials, meetings between U.S. diplomats and members of the Syrian opposition left more questions than answers.<sup>198</sup> The U.S. lacked real-time information about events occurring in the country. The administration had trouble developing situational awareness on the ground as most U.S. embassy staff and contacts were concentrated in Damascus, far from the outbreak of the uprisings. According to State Department officials, most of the information about Syria at the time was received in Washington, rather than Damascus.<sup>199</sup> For years, U.S. agencies had demonstrated more interest in the strategic international dimension of Syrian affairs rather than in the country’s internal dynamics. As a result, American diplomats dedicated most of the spring and summer attempting to piece together stories from

<sup>196</sup> Hirst, David, “Even anti-western Syria is not immune to revolution,” *The Guardian*, March 22, 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/mar/21/syria-not-immune-to-arab-uprising>

<sup>197</sup> Emile Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant* (New York: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2013), 13.

<sup>198</sup> Anonymous, interview by Kilic Kanat, July 2014.

<sup>199</sup> Anonymous, interview by Kilic Kanat, July 2014.

the news and personal reports in an attempt to garner an actionable understanding of events on the ground.

Furthermore, the administration had been making headway on the Middle East peace and non-proliferation talks. As such, officials shared a certain degree of hope that a settlement in Syria could be secured.<sup>200</sup> At the discrete request of its Syria envoys, the White House held off on issuing a harsh condemnation of the regime for fear that it would jeopardize the possibility of negotiations, efforts for which continued until the summer. The State Department also overestimated the regime's political acumen and believed the government could withstand the uprisings if it harnessed Assad's image and implemented changes. This later embarrassed the State Department after Secretary Hillary Clinton's extemporaneous comment about Assad as a "reformer" on *Face the Nation*. Questioned about Syria, Secretary Clinton underlined the differences between Libya and Syria:

Many of the members of the Congress of both parties, who have gone to Syria in recent months, have said they believe he is a reformer. What's been happening there for the last few weeks is deeply concerning. But there is a difference between calling out an aircraft and indiscriminately bombing your own cities than police actions, which frankly have exceeded the use of force that anyone of us want to see.<sup>201</sup>

These statements from Secretary Clinton later garnered significant criticism from the Syrian opposition.<sup>202</sup> Some members of the Congress also developed critical positions on the administration's Syria policy. They asked the administration to take a strong stand against the killing of the demonstrators in the country. Senator Joe Lieberman maintained that, in Syria, the international community should pursue the same course of action as it had in Libya. He said, "we're not going to stand by and allow this Assad to slaughter his people like his father did years ago and in doing so we're being consistent

<sup>200</sup> Steven Heydemann, interview by Kilic Kanat, January 2015.

<sup>201</sup> Lucy Madison, "Clinton: No Military Action in Syria for Now," *CBS News*, March 27, 2011, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/clinton-no-military-action-in-syria-for-now/>;

<sup>202</sup> Lake, Eli, "Syrian rebels don't want U.S. aid, at least for now," *The Washington Times*, March 27, 2011 <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/mar/27/syrian-rebels-dont-want-us-aid-at-least-for-now/print/>

with our American values and we're also on the side of the Arab people who want a better chance for a decent life."<sup>203</sup> Senator Kyl and Kirk raised similar criticisms about the administration's Syria policy. They argued that:

The Syrian people must know that the United States stands with them against the brutal Assad regime. We can ill afford another timid embrace of a democratic uprising.... We urge the President, Secretary Clinton and Ambassador Ford to publicly condemn the murders committed by the Assad dictatorship and to demonstrate their support for the Syrian people.<sup>204</sup>

Despite these calls from Congress, the administration continued its line of policy in Syria and rebuffed the criticism. However, the regime proved to be more rigid than anticipated, and hope faded after Assad delivered his defiant speech to the Syrian parliament in late March.<sup>205</sup> In fact, as stated by senior policymakers, the U.S. administration began to think that it could no longer negotiate with Assad.<sup>206</sup> Knee-deep in a NATO-mission in Libya that was turning out to be more complicated than expected, the administration was hesitant to make statements that could pull it more deeply into Syria. The belief that regional actors, in the name of national interest, would choose to manage the crisis independently, precluding the need for extensive U.S. intervention, permeated the administration.<sup>207</sup> The United States was also unable to ignore the issue-linkage between Syria and Iran, with whom it was engaged in serious nuclear negotiations.<sup>208</sup> All of these pieces and U.S. interests were defined very narrowly in Syria in 2011. They resulted in the administration's failure to immediately condemn—as had done with U.S. ally Mubarak and enemy Gadhafi.<sup>209</sup>

<sup>203</sup> Nagesh, Gautham, "Lieberman would back U.S. action in Syria," *The Hill*, March 27, 2011 <http://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/152031-lieberman-would-back-us-action-in-syria>

<sup>204</sup> Rubin, Jennifer, "Syria's dictator shows his true colors," *The Washington Post*, March 25, 2011 [https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/right-turn/post/syrias-dictator-shows-his-true-colors/2011/03/04/AFnGttUB\\_blog.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/right-turn/post/syrias-dictator-shows-his-true-colors/2011/03/04/AFnGttUB_blog.html)

<sup>205</sup> Anonymous, interview by Kilic Kanat, July 2014.

<sup>206</sup> Anonymous, interview by Kilic Kanat, July 2014.

<sup>207</sup> Anonymous, interview by Kilic Kanat, July 2014.

<sup>208</sup> David Schenker, interview by Kilic Kanat, July 21, 2014.

<sup>209</sup> Anonymous, interview by Kilic Kanat, July 2014.

Demonstrations in Syria continued to attract larger crowds despite the use of force by the regime against the protesters. As early as March 19th, New York Times reported that twenty thousand people had joined the funeral processions of protesters killed by the regime forces.<sup>210</sup> Though aware of the political costs attached to direct involvement, the White House and the State Department were sympathetic to the democratic ambitions of the Syrian people. Barack Obama issued his first criticisms against Assad for the violence at the start of April 2011. He made a statement condemning the Syrian government for the violence that it committed against the peaceful protesters. The administration, however, left a door open for the regime to pursue reform and outlined its expectation for the Syrian government to the repression of its citizens. The President stated, “until now, the Syrian government has not addressed the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people. Violence and detention are not the answer to the grievances of the Syrian people. It is time for the Syrian government to stop repressing its citizens and to listen to the voices of the Syrian people calling for meaningful political and economic reforms.”<sup>211</sup> Assad, however, continued to target peaceful protesters throughout the country.

April 22nd of that year was to be remembered as the deadliest day in Syria, witnessing the death of 99 Syrians. The White House released a statement condemning the violence. This time, the White House not only accused Assad of resorting to violence against his own people, but also pointed the finger at Iran for aiding the Syrian regime. The statement underlined, “President Assad is blaming outsiders while seeking Iranian assistance in repressing Syria’s citizens through the same brutal tactics that have been used by his Iranian allies.”<sup>212</sup> The statement called

<sup>210</sup> The New York Times, “Syrian Police Attack Marchers at Funerals,” March 19, 2011. [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/20/world/middleeast/20syria.html?\\_r=1&ref=world](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/20/world/middleeast/20syria.html?_r=1&ref=world)

<sup>211</sup> Barack Obama, “Statement from the President on the Violence in Syria,” April 8, 2011 (online by The White House Office of the Press Secretary), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/04/08/statement-president-violence-syria>.

<sup>212</sup> Kori Schulman, “A Statement by President Obama on Syria,” *The White House Blog*, April 22, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2011/04/22/statement-president-obama-syria>.

on President Assad to change course and respond to the demands of his people.<sup>213</sup> The Iranian linkage had been discovered earlier in April by the U.S. intelligence agencies. In a Wall Street Journal story it was reported that Obama administration officials had said that “they believe that Iran is materially assisting the Syrian government in its efforts to suppress their own people.”<sup>214</sup> With this statement Obama administration made this information public.

By April 29th, President Obama had signed Executive Order 13572, which declared the regime’s “continuing escalation of violence against the people” a national emergency and instituted targeted sanctions. In the EO, President Obama stated that the Syrian regime was responsible for committing “human rights abuses, including those related to the repression of the people in Syria, manifested most recently by the use of violence and torture against, and arbitrary arrests and detentions of, peaceful protestors.”<sup>215</sup> The sanctions were not targeted at Assad, but rather at a number of his relatives and confidants. These individuals included Assad’s brother, Maher al-Assad, as well as Atif Najib, Bashar’s cousin, and Ali Momlouk, the Syrian intelligence chief. Additionally, the Obama administration sanctioned the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force, which was heretofore under UN sanctions for supporting different militant groups around the world. Through this order, the United States also revoked licenses issued by the U.S. government allowing for the exportation of several goods and furnishings to Syria. Among them was a license issued for an airplane reserved for private use by Assad.<sup>216</sup> Following this statement, Secretary Clinton applauded the resolution put forth by the UN Human Rights Council in its Special Session on Syria, which con-

<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Entous, Adam & Matthew Rosenberg, “U.S. Says Iran Helps crackdown in Syria,” *The Wall Street Journal*, April 11, 2011. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704547804576261222747330438>

<sup>215</sup> “Obama Signs New Sanctions Against Syria,” *The Huffington Post*, June 29, 2011, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/04/29/obama-sanctions-syria\\_n\\_855593.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/04/29/obama-sanctions-syria_n_855593.html).

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

demned human rights abuses by the regime, calling on the establishment of an urgent investigation of the events.<sup>217</sup>

In May 2011, major figures from numerous government branches began to express their fading hopes for a compliant Assad regime. Senator Kerry admitted that he no longer viewed the Syrian government as willing to reform. He also mentioned that, while Assad held an opportunity to reform in the past, this was no longer the case.<sup>218</sup> Disagreements throughout the government branches as well as partisan disputes over the Syria policy resurfaced following Assad's continued attacks on civilians. For instance, Senator John McCain claimed, "lawmakers' contention that Assad could be a reformer was one of the great delusionary views in recent foreign policy history."<sup>219</sup> For Senator McCain, the miscalculation was not only that of Senator Kerry, "it was a whole lot of people, first of all the administration."<sup>220</sup> On the other hand, an equally important figure, Senate Intelligence Committee Chairwoman Dianne Feinstein, argued that Assad still had a chance to do the right thing. She asserted, "I don't think Syria has shaken out yet, I don't think we know what Assad will or won't do."<sup>221</sup> Other members of the Congress also expressed similar viewpoints. A bipartisan group of Senators introduced a resolution condemning abuses committed by the Syrian regime and calling for the expansion of targeted sanctions against Syrian officials. The resolution also expressed support for the Syrian people, who, it put forward, had joined peaceful protests in the streets of cities and towns across the country. The resolution was introduced by Senator Lieberman and Senator Marco Rubio and was cosponsored by prominent lawmakers including Senators John McCain, Jon Kyl, Richard Durbin, Lindsey Graham, John Cornyn, Johnny Isakson, Bob Menendez,

<sup>217</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, "The Human Rights Council's Special Session on Syria," *Press Statement*, April 29, 2011, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/04/162260.htm>.

<sup>218</sup> Rogin, "Kerry: It's Time to Give Up on Assad the Reformer."

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*

Ben Cardin, Bob Casey, John Barrasso, Kirsten Gillibrand, Chris Coons, Mark Kirk, John Hoeven and Kelly Ayotte.<sup>222</sup>

However during this period, the administration retained some hope for the Syrian regime. On May 8th, Secretary Clinton stated that, despite the mounting crackdown, the regime in Syria was still expected to take some steps towards political reform. In an interview, she stated, “there are deep concerns about what is going on inside Syria and we are pushing hard for the government of Syria to live up to its own stated commitment to reforms.”<sup>223</sup> The mounting criticisms against the Obama administration’s position coupled with the increasing death toll began to change the US perception of the events in Syria. A short time after the Secretary’s interview, this time in another interview, Secretary Clinton expressed the first signs of frustration about the Syrian regime. Answering a question about the lack of reaction from the U.S. in the wake of Assad’s attacks, Secretary Clinton said:

I think we wanted to coordinate with our allies in the European Union, to talk to our friends and partners in the region, especially those that border Syria, Israel, Iraq, and others. And we also wanted to make it clear that, as the President just said in his speech, President Assad of Syria can either lead this transition or get out of the way. And unfortunately, the evidence thus far is that he’s not providing the kind of leadership that is needed.<sup>224</sup>

However, she again stated that the window of opportunity was still open for the regime. She avoided making an “Assad must go” statement. She instead argued:

Well, I think President Obama was very clear. And what we want is to continue to support the voices of democracy, those who are standing against the brutality. But we’re also well aware every situation is different, and in this one, Assad has said a lot of things that you didn’t hear from other leaders in

<sup>222</sup> Press Release. “A Bipartisan Group of Senators Introduce Resolution Condemning Human Rights Abuses In Syria, Urging Further Sanctions,” *Website of John McCain, U.S. Senator- Arizona*, May 11, 2011. <http://www.mccain.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2011/5/post-e07e2930-bee0-db70-2fa2-7dc556a1eab8>

<sup>223</sup> Quinn, Andrew, “Clinton says reform still possible in Syria,” *Reuters*, May 6, 2011. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-usa-idUSTRE7455WO20110506>

<sup>224</sup> Transcript, Hillary Clinton-Katie Couric interview, *CBS Evening News*, May 19, 2011. <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/complete-transcript-hillary-clinton-may-19/>

the region about the kind of changes he would like to see. That may all be out the window, or he may have one last chance.<sup>225</sup>

Meanwhile, in the proceeding Executive Order 13573, President Obama targeted senior Syrian government officials, including Bashar al-Assad, Faruk al-Shara and other high-level authorities, mainly in response to the continuing escalation of violence by the Syrian government against the Syrian people.<sup>226</sup> The most significantly clear messages that the Obama administration conveyed to Assad originated from the President's speech on the Arab Spring in May 2011. The President alluded to the gross human rights violations and attacks against peaceful protesters in Syria and emphasized that Assad still held a choice: "he can lead that transition, or get out of the way," he said.<sup>227</sup> President Obama also stated that, if the regime failed to cease its wrongdoings, "it will continue to be challenged from within and isolated abroad."<sup>228</sup> A significant dimension of this speech was in the link President Obama drew between the violence of the Syrian regime and its Iranian ally, stressing the way in which Tehran was assisting the Syrian regime with its tactics of suppression.

These statements and sanctions, in part, signaled the end of U.S. efforts to restore ties with Syria. In this context, the United States began working at the multilateral level in June 2011, co-drafting a proposal with Canada that was later signed by 54 UN member states to address the escalating situation in Syria. The proposal called for the condemnation of violence and requests authorization for the creation of a UNHCR fact-finding mission.<sup>229</sup> In the meantime in a story in the Wall Street Journal reported

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

<sup>226</sup> Executive Order 13573 of May 20, 2011, Blocking Property of Senior Officials of the Government of Syria, *Code of Federal Regulations*, title 3 (2011): 29143-29146, <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Documents/13573.pdf>.

<sup>227</sup> Josh Rogin, "Full Text of Obama's Middle East Speech," *The Cable* (Foreign Policy blog), May 19, 2011, [http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/05/19/full\\_text\\_of\\_obamas\\_middle\\_east\\_speech](http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/05/19/full_text_of_obamas_middle_east_speech).

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

<sup>229</sup> "Fact Sheet on Syria," The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, August 18, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/08/18/fact-sheet-syria>;

that the administration was collecting information about the human rights abuses committed by the Syrian regime in preparation for a possible referral to the International Criminal Court.<sup>230</sup>

Further statements from the U.S. government followed the proposal, conveying to the opposition and other actors in the region that the U.S. would potentially act to stop the violence in Syria. Secretary Clinton made a statement that the Assad regime was running out of time. She claimed, “they are either going to allow a serious political process, that will include peaceful protests take place throughout Syria and engage a productive dialogue with members of the opposition and civil society, or they are going to continue to see increasingly organized resistance.”<sup>231</sup> Although there was an emphasis on an organized resistance, some members of the administration were already expressing views strongly against providing military aid to the opposition groups. According these administration officials, any form of militarized civil conflict would only bring radicalization, resulting in further instability in Syria. The only way to prevent such radicalization, they thought, was to form a moderate and unified opposition, but they were not very hopeful about the emergence of such an organization.<sup>232</sup> Later, this reasoning was frequently recited to explain the administration’s initial position of inaction in Syria.

A critical development during this period was U.S. Ambassador Robert Ford’s visit to Hama. The trip occurred just as the regime crackdown on protesters in the city escalated. According to State Department officials, the trip was not on the agenda and came as an individual initiative by Ford. He traveled to Hama by SUV and was surprisingly welcomed at regime-imposed roadblocks by Syrian soldiers, who did not recognize the potential repercussions of such a visit. When Ambassador Ford reached

<sup>230</sup> Solomon, Jay, “U.S. Pushes to Try Syria Regime,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 18, 2011. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303635604576391901761410060>

<sup>231</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, “Remarks on Syria,” July 1, 2011 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/07/167502.htm>.

<sup>232</sup> Steven Heydemann, interview by Kilic Kanat, January 2015.

Hama, the news of his visit spread in the streets. As people began to greet him, the gathering quickly transformed into a major demonstration.<sup>233</sup> According to reports, olive branch waving Syrians chanted on the streets, waving to the U.S. Ambassador's jeep; they placed red roses on the windshield and hood of his car.<sup>234</sup> Later, Ambassador Ford posted a message about the situation in Hama on his Facebook page, stating:

“The people in Hama have been demonstrating peacefully for weeks. Yes, there is a general strike, but what caused it? The government security measures that killed protesters in Hama. In addition, the government began arresting people at night and without any kind of judicial warrant. Assad had promised in his last speech that there would be no more arrests without judicial process. Families in Hama told me of repeated cases where this was not the reality. And I saw no signs of armed gangs anywhere – not at any of the civilian street barricades we passed.

Hama and the Syrian crisis is not about the U.S. at all. This is a crisis the Syrian people are in the process of solving.”<sup>235</sup>

While visiting the city, Ambassador Ford stopped at a hospital to visit those injured by the Syrian security forces and engaged in conversations with the protesters. This visit served as an important opportunity for the Obama administration to establish contact with the members of the opposition.<sup>236</sup>

The news of Ford's visit to both Hama and to the hospital made its way to Syrian government officials, who quickly condemned Ford's meeting with members of the Syrian opposition. Hama remained a symbolically important town for Syrian dissent. It is there where Bashar al-Assad's father massacred Syrian civilians in 1982. In its statement, the Syrian regime claimed that “the presence of the U.S. ambassador in Hama without previous permission is obvious proof of a clear evidence of the United States’

<sup>233</sup> Anonymous, interview by Kilic Kanat, July 2014.

<sup>234</sup> Rania Abouzeid, “U.S. Diplomat Causes Firestorm with Visit to Rebellious Syrian City,” *TIME*, July 8, 2011, <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2082128,00.html>.

<sup>235</sup> “A Note from Ambassador Robert Ford,” Facebook post, July 10, 2011 at 7:10 a.m., [https://www.facebook.com/note.php?note\\_id=10150237831306938](https://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=10150237831306938).

<sup>236</sup> Hillary Clinton, *Hard Choices* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014).

involvement in current events in Syria and it is an attempt to incite an escalation in the situation which disturbs Syria's security and stability."<sup>237</sup> The U.S. State Department responded to the accusations by stating that the Embassy in Damascus had, in fact, practiced its due diligence by informing the Syrian Foreign Ministry of the visit. The State Department stressed that "the fundamental intention was to make absolutely clear with his [Robert Ford] physical presence that we stand with those Syrians who are expressing their right to speak for change."<sup>238</sup> The show of solidarity with the city by the top U.S. diplomat in the country energized and motivated the opposition, generating a significant degree of hope among the members of the opposition. Following this event, the escalation of the crisis continued with Syria's decision to restrict the movement of U.S. diplomats. Shortly after the incident, the U.S. reciprocated the conditions imposed on them by Damascus and announced that Syrian diplomats would also be required to request permission prior to visiting Washington, D.C.<sup>239</sup> Approximately a month after this visit, Ambassador Ford gave an interview to *Foreign Policy* about his perspective about the developments in Syria. The interview had an alarmist tone, with Ambassador Ford quoted as saying, "I have seen no evidence yet in terms of hard changes on the ground that the Syrian government is willing to reform at anything like the speed demanded by the street protestors. If it doesn't start moving with far greater alacrity, the street will wash them away."<sup>240</sup>

Following Ford's visit and interview, relations between the two countries took on an increasingly antagonistic tone. A few days after the Hama visit, the U.S. and French embassies in Damascus were attacked by pro-government mobs. Secretary Clinton responded to the events by as-

<sup>237</sup> Martin Chulov, "Syria condemns US ambassador's 'provocative' visit to Hama," *The Guardian*, July 8, 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jul/08/syria-condemns-us-ambassador-visit-hama>.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>239</sup> "Fact Sheet on Syria."

<sup>240</sup> Lynch, Mark, "Our Man in Damascus," *Foreign Policy*, July 14, 2011. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/07/14/our-man-in-damascus/>

setting that Assad had lost his legitimacy and should not observe himself as indispensable for Syria's future. She also claimed that the U.S. government had nothing invested in his hold on power.<sup>241</sup> A day after this statement, in a televised interview, President Obama also maintained that the regime had lost its legitimacy. He said that "He [Assad] has missed opportunity after opportunity to present a genuine reform agenda. And that's why we've been working at an international level to make sure we keep the pressure up."<sup>242</sup> In the following days, top State Department officials, including

Secretary Clinton and Ambassador Hof, met with what would become the Syrian National Council (SNC) to discuss the steps the U.S. could take to address the growing crisis. The members of the Syrian opposition made three requests for the United States in efforts to assist it: 1) a call for Assad to step down, 2) broader reaching sanctions, and 3) an effort to pass a UNSC resolution condemning the violence. The Obama administration accepted the three requests as the foundation of a new plan, which was put into motion in August 2011.<sup>243</sup>

<sup>241</sup> "Clinton Says Syria's Assad 'Not Indispensable,'" *Voice of America*, July 10, 2011, <http://www.voanews.com/content/clinton-says-syrias-assad-not-indispensable--125382213/142106.html>.

<sup>242</sup> Landler, Mark & David E. Sanger, "White House, in Shift, Turns Against Syria Leader," *The New York Times*, Jul7 12, 2011. [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/13/world/middleeast/13policy.html?\\_r=2&ref=middleeast](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/13/world/middleeast/13policy.html?_r=2&ref=middleeast)

<sup>243</sup> Radwan Ziadeh, interview by Kilic Kanat,



**FOUR** OBAMA CALLS FOR  
ASSAD'S REMOVAL  
(AUGUST 2011-AUGUST 2012)

- ■ While trying to avoid involvement, the inner circle of the Obama White House did want to give a message to the world and to the Assad regime about its position on the conflict.



“We have consistently said that President Assad must lead a democratic transition or get out of the way. He has not led. For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside.”<sup>244</sup>

*President Obama, August 18, 2011*

The decision-making process for the U.S.’s denunciation of Assad was consistent with the general approach that President Obama employed to address other issues during his time in office. Presidential theorist James Pfiffner characterizes Pres. Obama’s approach as both encouraging of deliberation but also highly centralized, featuring the President as his own honest broker.<sup>245</sup> Former members of Pres. Obama’s foreign policy team, including Vali Nasr, offer similar arguments describing the foreign policy decision-making process at the White House. The process often included the exclusion of key personalities from debates and deliberations.<sup>246</sup> What made many observers of U.S. foreign policy team for Syria frustrated with this process was the lack of a clear policy, the absence of an interagency process, and a constant emphasis on the message instead of on strategizing policy responses for the crisis in Syria. Obviously, the Syrian conflict was something that the White House wanted to avoid to engaging in. However, while trying to avoid involvement, the inner circle

<sup>244</sup> Barack Obama, “Statement by President Obama on the Situation in Syria,” April 18, 2011 (online by The White House Office of the Press Secretary), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/08/18/statement-president-obama-situation-syria>.

<sup>245</sup> Pfiffn Pfiffner, “Decision Making in the Obama White House.”

<sup>246</sup> Vali Nasr, *The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat* (New York: Doubleday, 2013).

of the Obama White House did want to convey a message to the world and to the Assad regime its position on the conflict. In most instances, the lack of a clear message seemed less costly and less risky and a responsibility-free way of dealing with a complicated crises in a different parts of the world. Many in the State Department considered this an unconventional way of shaping foreign policy and approached it with skepticism.<sup>247</sup>

According to some observers, the White House foreign policy team believed that Assad was going to lose power in a very short period of time. The President was right in his previous messages to Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, which allowed him to be “on the right side of the history”. Rather than analyzing the differences and similarities between Egypt and Syria, close advisors of President Obama were instead concerned that Assad might be overthrown before the President issued any definite judgment about him publicly. Because of that, they pressured him to make a statement about Assad without preparing a corresponding strategy that would back up this message as strong, determined, and well-thought-out.<sup>248</sup> There were also other expectations for the message. According to many, not only would the rhetoric serve to position the administration on the “right side” of history in Syria, but it would also encourage military defections and empower the opposition to topple the regime without significant investment from the U.S. After all, this had been the outcome following the President’s denunciation of Mubarak in Egypt. As David Remnick put forward during an interview with President Obama, the President (as well as his inner circle) believed that his words could encourage positive change in different parts of the world. Such a message would create psychological support for the opposition in Syria and would simultaneously demoralize and isolate the regime. Moreover, it would improve the Obama administration’s image worldwide by demonstrating its commitment to U.S. ideals.<sup>249</sup>

<sup>247</sup> Anonymous, interview by Kilic Kanat, July 2014.

<sup>248</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>249</sup> Remnick, David, “Going the Distance: ON and off the road with Barack Obama,” *The New Yorker*, January 27, 2014. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/27/going-the-distance-david-remnick>

According to Ambassador Hof, most policymakers in the administration agreed that the Assad regime was a “dead man walking,” however, disagreement arose over “how long that walk would be.”<sup>250</sup> Veterans in the inter-agency, like Hillary Clinton and Leon Panetta, believed that recommendations about putting out a statement over emphasized using messaging to shape public opinion above crafting effective policy to bring down the regime. If Assad outlasted the White House’s expectations, they felt that President Obama would have to back up his statement with action. Yet, Obama claimed in an August 18, 2011 speech that the United States has “heard [activists’] strong desire that there not be foreign intervention in their movement,” relieving the U.S. of any responsibility if and when the crisis worsened.<sup>251</sup> The National Security Council (NSC), either confident enough in the power of rhetoric or so certain of Pres. Obama’s unwillingness to get involved militarily, did not advise the President to request contingency plans from the Pentagon. The White House did not even consult the military in high-level discussions until the end of 2011.<sup>252</sup> Therefore, members of Pres. Obama’s NSC team emphasized rhetoric over policy in the decision to call on Assad to cede his role in government. However, the repercussions of such a statement for the opposition and U.S. allies in the region extended beyond messaging; many of them expected a corresponding strategy.

President Obama’s statement on Syria constituted the first significant split between the White House and the State Department. The Obama administration issued the statement on August 18, 2011 asserting that “Assad must step aside.” They supposed that these magic words that would mark the end of the regime. President Obama said,

“The future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al-Assad is standing in their way. His calls for dialogue and reform

<sup>250</sup> Anonymous, interview by Kilic Kanat, July 2014.

<sup>251</sup> Macon Phillips, “President Obama: ‘The future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al-Assad is standing in their way,’” *The White House Blog*, August 18, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2011/08/18/president-obama-future-syria-must-be-determined-its-people-president-bashar-al-assad>.

<sup>252</sup> Anonymous, interview by Kilic Kanat, July 2014.

have rung hollow while he is imprisoning, torturing, and slaughtering his own people. We have consistently said that President Assad must lead a democratic transition or get out of the way. He has not led. For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside.”<sup>253</sup>

The statement was interpreted by the Syrian opposition, observers of U.S. politics and U.S. allies around the world as a U.S. commitment to overthrow the regime in Syria. However, many in the U.S. bureaucracy had not anticipated such a strong statement from the President. Accordingly, despite the public statement, neither the State Department nor the Pentagon had any plans or preparations for how to handle the situation.<sup>254</sup> Moreover, according to State Department projections, Assad was not going anywhere in the short term.

There were two significant issues that most complicated the calculations of President Obama's inner circle on the end of the Assad regime. First, those who rushed the President to issue a statement assumed that the Assad regime had a moral compass and that it would not make the mistake of shelling its own cities or engaging in civilian massacres. They assumed that, after the number of protestors increase and as the demonstrations spread to other cities, the regime would be forced to take a step back, which would trigger the demise of the regime. Second, they underestimated the level of military assistance the Syrian regime would receive from its allies in the region. Although the potential role of Iran was taken into consideration, the administration expected that, at a certain point, Assad would run out of ammunition.<sup>255</sup> The foreign policy bureaucracy and other veteran officials were more skeptical about this projection. For others, the administration was feeling the pressure of critical *Washington Post* editorials more than the pressure from allies and the Syrian opposition; the administration wanted to appease *The Washington Post's* Editorial Board

<sup>253</sup> Obama, “Statement by President Obama on the Situation in Syria.”

<sup>254</sup> Anonymous interview, by Kilic Kanat, July 2014

<sup>255</sup> Anonymous, interview by Kilic Kanat, July 2014.

with a strong statement on Syria.<sup>256</sup> In multiple editorials in 2011, *The Washington Post* had harshly criticized the Obama administration's inaction in Syria. In one of these editorials in April, the inaction was described as "shameless"<sup>257</sup> and in June, there was another editorial that said:

It seems fair to ask what Mr. Obama has done in response, given his pledge to employ all of the "tools" at the administration's disposal. The answer can be summed up in one word: nothing... The administration has excused its passivity by saying that it does not want to "get ahead" of allies in the region, and that it worries about the consequences of a regime collapse. But Mr. Assad's violence is already causing serious problems for Turkey and for Israel, which has twice faced incursions on its territory from Syria by Palestinian refugees organized by the regime. Other U.S. Arab allies are observing Mr. Obama's passivity with dismay: "Why doesn't the United States have a policy?" one senior official from the Persian Gulf recently asked us.

In fact, Mr. Obama enunciated a clear policy four weeks ago. He said the United States would use all its power to stop violent repression and promote democratic transition in countries such as Syria. He said his words "must be translated into concrete actions." But he has yet to act.<sup>258</sup>

Just before President Obama's "Assad must go" statement, *The Washington Post* published yet another editorial about U.S. inaction in Syria, in which they stated:

Until recently, the Obama administration was still describing the solution to Syria's crisis as negotiations between the regime and opposition. On Sunday President Obama, who has spoken in public about Syria only twice since the rebellion began in March, issued a statement saying he was "appalled" by the "horrifying" reports from Hama, "which demonstrate the true character of the Syrian regime." It was not clear, however, what action, if any, the administration was prepared to take.

Mr. Obama promised that "in the days ahead, the United States will continue to increase our pressure on the Syrian regime." But we have heard that before. On June 17, administration officials gave reporters a briefing in which they used those same words and talked about such measures as sanctions against Syria's oil and gas sector and the referral of Mr. Assad and his collabo-

<sup>256</sup> Anonymous, interview by Kilic Kanat, July 2014.

<sup>257</sup> "Shameful U.S. inaction on Syria's massacres," *The Washington Post*, April 22, 2011, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/shameful-us-inaction-on-syrias-massacres/2011/04/22/AFROWsQE\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/shameful-us-inaction-on-syrias-massacres/2011/04/22/AFROWsQE_story.html).

<sup>258</sup> "Silence on Syria," *The Washington Post*, June 15, 2011, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/silence-on-syria/2011/06/15/AG9v0WWH\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/silence-on-syria/2011/06/15/AG9v0WWH_story.html).

rators to the International Criminal Court on war crimes charges. Nothing has happened since then. Is it any wonder that Mr. Assad thinks he can slaughter the people of Hama with impunity?<sup>259</sup>

According to many analysts, these editorials sparked an intense debate within the NSC as well as within the President's inner circle about what message should be conveyed. They were considered critical ahead of a presidential race and added further pressure to provide a message. However, many of the same members of the administration believed that, once stated by the President, the position would not constitute the main tenet of U.S. foreign policy. It became clear to all later that the statement had merely been rhetoric preceding a formal strategy.<sup>260</sup>

The President's statement was accompanied by Executive Order 13582, issuing the harshest U.S. petroleum-related sanctions to-date on Syria. The order was fulfilling the first two items on the opposition's wish list. Pres. Obama then sought to fulfill their third request by approaching the UNSC to draft a resolution condemning regime violence and urging a "Syrian-led political process."<sup>261</sup> The draft was presented for a vote in October 2011, but was rejected by China and Russia in the first double UNSC veto since 2008, causing U.S. Ambassador to the UN Susan Rice to storm out of the Council.<sup>262</sup> Thus, the Syrian opposition's wish list was exhausted to marginal avail.

Following President's call for Assad to step down, , a new debate began in the U.S. about the possible U.S. actions in Syria. There were some who supported a strong position, which if necessary would include military intervention halt the atrocities being committed by the Assad regime.

<sup>259</sup> "Syria's Ramadan massacre," *The Washington Post*, August 1, 2011, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/syrias-ramadan-massacre/2011/08/01/gIQAZHCKoL\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/syrias-ramadan-massacre/2011/08/01/gIQAZHCKoL_story.html).

<sup>260</sup> Anonymous, interview by Kilic Kanat, July 2014.

<sup>261</sup> "Russia and China veto draft Security Council resolution on Syria," *UN News Centre*, October 4, 2011, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=39935#.U9XJ34BdVU4>.

<sup>262</sup> Daniel Miller, "They'd rather sell arms than stand with the Syrian people': U.S. envoy storms out after Russia and China veto U.N resolution," *Daily Mail*, October 5, 2011, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2045442/US-envoy-Susan-Rice-storms-Russia-China-veto-UN-resolution.html>.

Joshua Landis summarized such arguments saying that this group of scholars, who are mainly the neocons, were not advocating direct military involvement in Syria because of the political realities in the US. However, they were “preparing the grounds for a much higher level of military commitment in the future. They understand full well that in order to take down the Assad regime and counter the force of the Syrian military, the Syrian opposition will need to develop a full military option. To do so, it will need major U.S. and NATO backing.”<sup>263</sup> On the other hand more realists observers of the U.S. policy towards Syria argued that the U.S. did not need to involve itself in the conflict in Syria. Instead, they argued that Assad was too strong for U.S. intervention, saying, “The U.S. is trying to prune its military commitments not grow them. The Assad regime still has the support of important sections of the population. It is not a clear good versus evil battle but something reflects deeper civil and sectarian divisions in Syria. The Syrian opposition is hopelessly divided. Perhaps it will develop a leadership, but that will take time and must be left to emerge organically for the time being.”<sup>264</sup> The debate was closely followed by both the administration and by the public opinion in the country. Early public opinion polls showed that the American public was not enthusiastic about directly military involvement in yet another foreign conflict, a point which would be frequently brought up by the members of the administration.

Even though many observers stopped expecting a diplomatic solution for the crisis in Syria in light of Russian and Chinese attitudes at the UNSC, the United States continued to push for a multilateral approach to manage the conflict. There were several causes for this continuation of a diplomatic push. First of all, there were still serious domestic economic issues to be dealt with and under these circumstances a military solution for Syria, which would necessitate high-level U.S. involvement, was con-

<sup>263</sup> Landis, Joshua, “Washington’s battle over Syria,” *CNN*, August 27th, 2011. <http://global-publicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2011/08/24/washingtons-battle-over-syria/>

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*

sidered too costly. Secondly, as previously mentioned, American public opinion was reluctant about another “military adventure” in the Middle East, a view which many in the Obama administration shared. In particular, the specter of American unilateralism in Iraq still haunted President Obama. After years of fruitless military occupation that only served to aggravate sectarianism in Iraq, the President had a strong aversion to any political or military action that might prompt a similar situation in Syria. For this reason, throughout the end of 2011, the administration looked only to take minimal symbolic steps though statements against Assad. For instance, in October, the administration pulled out ambassador from Damascus because of increasing security concerns. In this instance, the developments on the ground pressured the administration to take a more forceful stance. Senior administration officials issued statements that would have far reaching repercussions. For instance, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, in an October press conference, said that it would only be matter of time before the Assad regime toppled down. He stated that “While he (Assad) continues to resist, I think it’s very clear that it’s a matter of time before that (exit) in fact happens. When it does, we don’t know.”<sup>265</sup> Vice President Joe Biden also sparked debate when he claimed that the military intervention model used in Libya—coalition air power with rebel groups on the ground— could be utilized elsewhere.<sup>266</sup> It was also reported that the Obama administration was preparing for a Syria without Assad in order to prevent an Iraq like scenario in the country.<sup>267</sup> Meanwhile, the American press continuously reported bureaucratic infighting over U.S. policy on the Syrian crisis. In one instance, there were

<sup>265</sup> AFP, “Fall of Syrian regime a matter of time, says U.S. defense chief,” *Al Arabiya News*, October 3, 2011. <https://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/10/03/170046.html>

<sup>266</sup> Ewen MacAskill, “US pulls ambassador Robert Ford out of Syria over security concerns,” *The Guardian*, October 24, 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/oct/24/us-withdraws-ambassador-syria-robert-ford>.

<sup>267</sup> Cooper, Helene, “U.S. Is Quietly Getting Ready for Syria Without Assad,” *The New York Times*, September 19, 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/20/world/middleeast/us-is-quietly-getting-ready-for-a-syria-without-an-assad.html>

apparent jurisdictional disagreements about sending emergency medical equipment to Syria. Different agencies seemed unable to resolve their differences and in the end no medical aid was sent. There were also reports of disagreements within the administration on how to approach the Arab League's monitoring mission. Some in the administration were skeptical about the mission and argued that the bar for intervention was set too high in an effort to prevent military intervention.<sup>268</sup>

In December 2011, media reports surfaced that the Obama administration was beginning to deliberate on several possible courses of action to assist the Syrian opposition. According to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights,<sup>269</sup> the number of deaths by the regime had surpassed 5,000. This number led to increased pressure on the administration from the Congress, some members of which believed that the President was too hesitant to intervene to stop killings.<sup>270</sup> This report followed a statement by Fred Hof, predicting the possible fall of the Assad regime in the very near future, referring to the Assad regime as "dead man walking." Hof went so far as to request that the opposition prepare for the day that it took control of the Syrian state.<sup>271</sup> However, despite growing criticism from members of the administration, the U.S. government continued to act slowly rather than engaging in a rapid response. The administration justified its position by stating that it needed to respond cautiously in order to avoid further destabilizing in the region and to learn more about the complex nature of both Syria and the Syrian people. Reports suggest that the NSC had begun an informal and interagency process of collecting options to provide

<sup>268</sup> Josh Rogin, "Obama administration secretly preparing options for aiding the Syrian opposition," *The Cable* (Foreign Policy blog), December 28, 2011, [http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/12/28/obama\\_administration\\_secretly\\_preparing\\_options\\_for\\_aiding\\_the\\_syrian\\_opposition](http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/12/28/obama_administration_secretly_preparing_options_for_aiding_the_syrian_opposition).

<sup>269</sup> "Syria: 5,000 dead in violence, says UN human rights chief," *The Guardian*, December 12, 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/dec/12/syria-5000-dead-violence-un>.

<sup>270</sup> Rogin, "Obama administration secretly preparing options for aiding the Syrian opposition."

<sup>271</sup> Matthew Lee, "US: Assad's Syria a 'dead man walking,'" *The Christian Science Monitor*, December 14, 2011, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Latest-News-Wires/2011/1214/US-Assad-s-Syria-a-dead-man-walking>.

assistance to the Syrian opposition. The process was led by the NSC Senior Director, Steve Simon. According to participating officials, the process included “establishing a humanitarian corridor or safe zone for civilians in Syria along the Turkish border, extending humanitarian aid to the Syrian rebels, providing medical aid to Syrian clinics, engaging more with the external and internal opposition, forming an international contact group, or appointing a special coordinator for working with the Syrian opposition (as was done in Libya).”<sup>272</sup> According to the same reports, many members of the administration had already realized that the current situation was not sustainable and recognized the fact that financial sanctions alone were not sufficient to bring about the end of the Syrian regime.<sup>273</sup>

The beginning of 2012 was again a period characterized by consistent U.S. condemnation of the Syrian regime, but void of meaningful action on the part of the Obama administration. In December 2011, a spokesman for the State Department stated that, if the regime did not put an end to its tactics, the international community would start looking for alternative means to protect civilians in Syria. Following this, in January 2012, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton condemned the regime’s violent and brutal attacks against civilians in Syria and stated that if Assad remained in power, the instability might escalate and spill over the region.<sup>274</sup> In a hearing at the Senate Intelligence Committee, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper delivered important remarks about the conflict in Syria. He asserted that it was only a matter of time before Assad would lose his power and being toppled in Syria. Although Clapper also conditioned that this process could be drawn out, he also mentioned that “protraction of these demonstrations, the opposition continues to be fragmented, but I do not see how he can sustain his rule of Syria.” In this

<sup>272</sup> Rogin, “Obama administration secretly preparing options for aiding the Syrian opposition.”

<sup>273</sup> Ibid.

<sup>274</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, “Sharp Escalation of Regime Violence in Syria,” Press Release, January 30, 2012 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2012/01/182720.htm>.

hearing he also advised that the threat of increased Iranian and Hezbollah influence in the conflict was growing.<sup>275</sup>

President Obama, in his 2012 state of union address, made a similar remark about Syrian conflict. He stated that “In Syria, I have no doubt that the Assad regime will soon discover that the forces of change can’t be reversed, and that human dignity can’t be denied.” However he again did not make a roadmap or actions that he will undertake in Syria.<sup>276</sup> In February, President Obama released a subsequent statement commemorating the 30th anniversary of the Hama Massacre and promised to help the Syrian people to achieve their goals. He also reiterated that the Assad regime must come to an end.<sup>277</sup>

Critics of the administration’s inaction in Syria from Congress argued that the Obama White House need to begin to consider alternative options to help the opposition within Syria. For the first time since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war the possibility of arming rebels was openly discussed. According to a note released by Senators John McCain, Lindsey Graham and Joe Lieberman, the means of support they envisioned included political and military assistance “to organize their activities, to care for the wounded and find safe haven, to communicate securely, to defend themselves, and to fight back against Assad’s forces.”<sup>278</sup> To achieve these goals, these three senators requested that the administration work together with U.S. allies in the region, including Turkey, under a joint effort. During congressional hearings, members began hounding the administration about its Syria policy. Answers given by administration officials made

<sup>275</sup> Zakaria, Tabassum, “U.S. spy chief says Syria’s Assad cannot hold power,” *Reuters*, January 21, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-intelligence-syria-idUSTRE80U1H520120131>.

<sup>276</sup> Friedman, Uri, “Highlights from Obama’s SOTU address,” *Foreign Policy*, January 25, 2012, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/01/25/highlights-from-obamas-sotu-address/>

<sup>277</sup> President Obama, “Statement by the President on Syria,” Press Release, February 4, 2012 (online by The White House Office of the Press Secretary), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/02/04/statement-president-syria>.

<sup>278</sup> “Graham, McCain, Lieberman Statement on Syria,” Office of Sen. Lindsey Graham, Press Release, February 8, 2012, [http://www.legistorm.com/stormfeed/view\\_rss/411052/member/44.html](http://www.legistorm.com/stormfeed/view_rss/411052/member/44.html).

it painfully clear that the administration was still unwilling to deepen U.S. commitment to the conflict. There was an increasing emphasis on the differences between Libya and Syria. Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff General Dempsey, in one of those hearings, laid out those differences to congressional members, saying,

“My observations, Senator, are that it is a much different situation than we collectively saw in Libya. And I think that's an important point to make because we don't have as clear an understanding of the nature of the opposition. We're working in the intelligence community to develop it. But, as you know, there's some significant differences vis-a-vis Syria. There is a chemical and biological warfare threat. There's a very significant integrated air defense system, a very credible military. We're watching the trend lines on their military to see if they are still under the control of the regime.”<sup>279</sup>

Such remarks from administration officials were contradictory with the findings of senior intelligence officials. In March, The Washington Post reported that “senior U.S. intelligence officials described the nation's (Syria) President, Bashar al-Assad, on Friday as firmly in control and increasingly willing to unleash one of the region's most potent militaries on badly overmatched opposition groups. The officials also said Assad's inner circle is “remaining steadfast,” with little indication that senior figures in the regime are inclined to peel off, despite efforts by the Obama administration and its allies to use sanctions and other measures to create a wave of defections that would undermine Assad.”<sup>280</sup> According to these officials Assad's inner circle was remaining steadfast.<sup>281</sup> Another official also stated that there is no sign of fracturing within the Assad regime.<sup>282</sup>

<sup>279</sup> Testimony of Martin E. Dempsey to the United States Congress, “President's 2013 Defense Department Budget Request,” *C-SPAN*, February 14, 2012, <http://www.c-span.org/video/?304412-1/defense-department-2013-budget-request>

<sup>280</sup> Miller, Gret & Daren De Young, “Syria's Bashar al-Assad firmly in control, U.S. intelligence officials say,” *The Washington Post*, March 9, 2012, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/syrias-bashar-al-assad-firmly-in-control-us-intelligence-officials-say/2012/03/09/gIQAv7r71R\\_print.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/syrias-bashar-al-assad-firmly-in-control-us-intelligence-officials-say/2012/03/09/gIQAv7r71R_print.html)

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>282</sup> Starr Barbara & Jamie Crawford, “U.S. sees “no fracturing of Assad regime,” *CNN*, March 1, 2012, <http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2012/03/01/u-s-sees-no-fracturing-of-assad-regime/>

When the Friends of Syria meeting was launched in Tunis at the beginning of 2012, members of the Obama administration provided more questions than answers about the situation in Syria. Secretary Clinton stated the necessity of a negotiated political solution to the crisis; however, later in an interview, she described the situation in a more complicated manner. Secretary Clinton stated that the people in Aleppo needed to do something about the “illegitimate regime”<sup>283</sup> that kills innocent civilians and protesters. Her words gave the impression that the U.S. anticipated that, if the residents of Aleppo joined the demonstrators, it would trigger the fall of the regime. However, Secretary Clinton was less clear on the what threshold of violence that would trigger a military intervention by the U.S. into Syria. Clinton argued, “it is important to stop and ask what that is and who’s going to do it and how capable anybody is of doing it. And I like to get to the second, third and fourth order questions, and those are very difficult ones.”<sup>284</sup> Her statements created confusion among the observers of U.S. policy on Syria. Later, In her memoirs, Clinton mentioned a discussion with the Saudi Foreign Minister, Prince Saud al-Faisal, about providing weapons to the rebel groups. The Saudi Minister stated that it would be an excellent idea to arm these groups and attempted to convince the Obama administration to follow suit on the plan. However, Secretary Clinton was wary about the further militarization of the conflict and feared the acceleration of the country’s descent into a full-scale civil war.<sup>285</sup> From these messages, it was not clear what the Obama administration was planning to do about Syria. On the one hand, it sounded like the administration was expecting the fall of the regime once Aleppo joined the opposition, and on the other, like it was trying to establish a military intervention as a distant possibility.

The statements that came after Clinton’s assertions were no less confusing. In a statement on Syria before the House Armed Services Com-

<sup>283</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, interview by Wyatt Andres, *CBS*, Sofitel Hotel, Rabat, Morocco, February 26, 2012, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2012/02/184662.htm>.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>285</sup> Clinton, *Hard Choices*.

mittee, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta made similar suggestions. After enumerating the Obama administration's endeavors in regards to Syria, he underlined the final objective of the administration by stating, "Make no mistake—one way or another, this regime ultimately will meet its end."<sup>286</sup> Yet, just like other members of the administration he failed to provide a clear path to resolve the crisis, and instead resorted to comparing and contrasting the Syrian crisis with the Libyan conflict. According to Panetta, the operation in Libya had provided the Obama administration with lessons for the crisis in Syria. As in the Libyan case, the U.S. was following a multilateral and international engagement approach; it maintained regional support from the Arab world; offered substantial contributions; searched for a clear legal basis for the approach; and kept all options on the table, cautiously recognizing the limitations of the use of military force. However, it was not clear what the limitations of the use of military force were and if there were any conditions that would remove these limitations. Moreover, Panetta emphasized the lack of support from the Arab world and UNSC authorization for military intervention. He also suggested that, unlike the Libyan case, the opposition in Syria was not well organized. Despite these limitations, he suggested that they were "continuing to plan for a variety of possible scenarios should the President determine that further steps are necessary."<sup>287</sup> Panetta's presentation constituted yet another set of conflicting and confusing statements by a member of the Obama administration. This intensified the scrutiny of the White House by outside observers over its Syria policy. In the meantime some reports in US media also state discussions between Turkey and US about a possible buffer zone. Especially after some instances of Syrian troops firing across the border, these debates intensified.<sup>288</sup>

<sup>286</sup> Leon E. Panetta, Statement on Syria before the House Armed Services Committee, "Secretary of Defense Testimony," Hearing, April 19, 2012, <http://www.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1663>.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid.

<sup>288</sup> Labott, Elise, "U.S. discusses possible buffer zones for Syria," *CNN*, April 11, 2012, <http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2012/04/11/whats-next-for-syria/>

The 2012 national elections in the United States added another level of complication to the Syrian crisis. Obviously, the Obama administration did not want to take any risks over its policy in Syria, resorting to following a policy of diplomatic engagement on the one hand, and political and military avoidance on the other. In most instances, members of the administration indicated that sanctions against the regime were proving effective. In fact, sanctions aside, the administration became even less clear in its direction on Syria.

Foreign policy was not among the primary concerns of U.S. voters during this election and President Obama did not want the debate to shift to foreign policy during the race. Thus, the administration worked through the UN and the Friends of Syria Group to address the political angle of the conflict. The UNSC was able to make progress in summer 2012, when it approved the ceasefire-monitoring group under Kofi Annan's six-point plan and issued the Geneva Communiqué calling for a transitional government in Syria. The Obama administration seemed to place an unwarranted amount of faith in this communiqué as a potential solution to the conflict. While the election was nearing, the administration believed that it had enough ammunition in terms of diplomatic endeavors and international engagement to respond any questions on Syria. Moreover, different members of the administration constantly emphasized the "war fatigue of Americans" and "low-level of support for a military intervention to Syria," and tried to preempt any criticisms from the Republican candidate on Syria. The administration believed that all of the possible politically-correct, risk-free and cost-free steps had already been taken to avoid any kind of damage during the elections: the strong message was given, the military intervention was avoided, the humanitarian assistance was provided, and diplomatic and multilateral endeavors were launched.

Throughout 2012, despite scattered multilateral attempts, the administration seemed to decide the Syrian problem as too intricate and complicated to deal with. Secretary Clinton referred to it as a "wicked one," one that defies standard solutions and approaches. According to her, every

option was worse than the next. In her memoir, she explains the conflict and options in Syria by stating, "Do nothing, and a humanitarian disaster envelops the region. Intervene militarily, and risk opening Pandora's Box and wading into another quagmire, like Iraq. Send aid to the rebels and watch it end up in the hands of extremists. Continue with diplomacy, and run head-first into a Russian veto."<sup>289</sup> In 2012, the differences of opinion within the administration about how to deal with the Syrian crisis also started to be seen more clearly. As Geneva efforts were halted, the Secretary of State and others within the administration searched for a solution that would include arming the moderate Syrian rebels. Clinton's plan depended on several motivations. On the one hand, arming a small group of moderate forces, regardless of its size, would give a big psychological boost to the Syrian opposition and pressure the Assad regime to agree to a political solution. Such a move was necessary in order to stabilize problems with regional partners. In addition, a well-trained and equipped force could also provide security and governance in the aftermath of the Assad regime, and prevent revenge attacks and chaos in the country. To achieve these goals, Clinton reportedly worked together with General Petraeus, who was director of the CIA by then, to set a plan to vet, train and equip moderate opposition fighters. The plan later received the support of Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, who was equally frustrated with the deadlock in the region. Secretary Clinton also traveled to Turkey in August 2012 to discuss her plan, receiving feedback from Ankara. Two days after her visit, the Turkish Foreign Minister announced their agreement with her plan of action. Soon afterward, Secretary Clinton and Foreign Minister Davutoglu informed and discussed this issue with the foreign ministers of Great Britain, France and Germany.<sup>290</sup> Secretary Clinton presented her plan, supported now by her regional and European counterparts, to President Obama. According to Clinton, the plan also had a very high-level of support at the NSC.

<sup>289</sup> Clinton, *Hard Choices*.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*

However, the second group of decision-makers, including President Obama, considered inaction to be the best course of action and were unwilling to engage in any form of armed conflict in the region. According to Clinton, this second group included some of the top generals in the country.<sup>291</sup> It was later reported that those in President Obama's close advisory circle at the White House were also skeptical about such a course of action by a president whose main election promise was to end U.S. military involvement in the Middle East.<sup>292</sup> Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes, who was considered to be a very significant member of the second group and a part of Obama's inner circle, later explained the reason for the decision. He claimed that "1) we wanted to make sure that we were providing assistance to people who we knew so that it wouldn't fall into the wrong hands given how many extremists were operating in the area" and "2) we didn't see a plan that was going to decisively tip the balance against Assad."<sup>293</sup> Despite some debate between these two groups, the decision of the President prevailed and the Obama administration continued to follow the same policy, failing to shift away from the policy of inaction.

In late 2014, after Clinton published her memoirs and gave a set of interviews on the rise of ISIS and the situation in Syria and Iraq, the administration's plan to arm the Syrian opposition had become a contested and controversial topic and source of major debate between the Clinton and Obama teams. It was revealed that, throughout 2011 and in most of 2012, the White House had barred the State Department from engaging in any talks with moderate Syrian rebels. Reportedly, during this period, and especially in mid-2012, the State Department cautioned the administration about radical groups and requested that the administration aid

<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

<sup>292</sup> Anonymous, interview by Kilic Kanat, July 2014.

<sup>293</sup> Josh Rogin, "Obama Stifled Hillary's Syria Plans and Ignored Her Iraq Warnings for Years," *The Daily Beast*, August 14, 2014, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/08/14/obama-stifled-hillary-s-syria-plans-and-ignored-her-iraq-warnings-for-years.html>.

moderate forces so that they could emerge as the center of gravity on the ground. The State Department also warned the Obama administration that the conflict in Syria could potentially spill over to Iraq. Ambassador Ford, for instance, stated that the State Department warned the administration of the interaction between extremists in Iraq and Syria, and that Iraq and Syria could emerge as one all-encompassing conflict. However, the close inner circle at the White House, once again, preferred to stand by its position.<sup>294</sup> Later, reportedly, the State Department prepared classified reports for the White House stating that “the Assad regime was much more durable than thought and was not on the verge of collapse.”<sup>295</sup> The divide between the two groups prevailed after these reports. For Clinton, it was important to engage with the armed groups, as they were the only potential game-changer under the current circumstances in Syria. However, the White House continued to engage only with the non-armed civilian opposition groups. Despite some reports about the necessity to assist the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the Obama administration did not allow any agency to help the group in 2012.<sup>296</sup> The State Department even attempted to respond to the White House’s concerns regarding the risks of arming rebels for U.S. security by trying to figure out who the rebels were and how to help them in a way that would not create any risk for U.S. security, but to no avail.<sup>297</sup>

In the meantime, the Pentagon was also evaluating its options in Syria. For the Defense Department, the primary concern was Assad’s chemical weapons. According to the plans prepared by Pentagon staff, at least 75,000 troops would be necessary to enter the country and secure all of the weapons repositories. Considering the unacceptability of such a scenario, Secretary of Defense Panetta presented different and less costly options to the NSC, including the use of limited air attacks, protecting

<sup>294</sup> Ibid.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid

<sup>297</sup> Ibid

refugee camps and supporting regional allies.<sup>298</sup> In his memoirs, Panetta stated that there was not much support for any kind of military action among President Obama's top advisers. As a result, less aggressive measures such as coordinating a regional response and surveying Assad's air defense systems were evaluated.<sup>299</sup>

During 2012, the Friends of Syria Group spent a great deal of its early efforts looking to shape and strengthen the political opposition, out of a belief that a more legitimate political force could attract greater domestic and international support. The countries that participated in the group had also been members of the Friends of Libya, and as stated by Secretary of Defense Panetta, were willing to follow the Libya intervention model. Enthusiasm to participate in the Friends of Syria among members of the opposition was initially high because of the anticipation that they would receive military support, just as the Libyan opposition had. Yet, Hillary Clinton signaled the differences between Libya and Syria in January 2012, when she called Libya a "false analogy" for operations and instead pushed for a diplomatic solution.<sup>300</sup> Through the Friends of Syria, the United States pushed the SNC to more broadly represent Syria's various political beliefs, sectarian identities, genders and ethnicities, as a way to garner greater support inside and out of Syria. While the Syrian National Council, which became the Syrian National Coalition or Etilaf, became a more attractive interlocutor with the international community, it failed to have a strong resonance on the ground, as most of its members were trying to influence Syria from the outside. Therefore, the first initiative achieved modest gains but was not enough to shape the direction of the conflict.

The State Department also worked with allies and the opposition to develop a plan for a political transition after Assad's collapse. This was called

<sup>298</sup> Leon Panetta, *Worthy Fights: A Memoir of Leadership in War and Peace* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014), 370.

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>300</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Remarks at the United Nations Security Council Session on the Situation in Syria," January 31, 2012, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2012/01/182845.htm>.

“The Day After Project,” which responded to many questions that were directed to the opposition about the nature of the regime and governance in Syria in the aftermath of the overthrow of the regime.<sup>301</sup> Yet, these efforts addressed problems that the opposition did not yet have; instead, the opposition needed a plan of action to unseat Assad in order to get to that stage. Without the participation of the Pentagon or the CIA, such a plan would not be forthcoming and there was little the State Department could do to help. One State Department official familiar with the conflict criticized the administration’s policy, claiming it focused too much on understanding the problem and not enough on solving it by unifying the armed opposition against Assad.<sup>302</sup> This initiative, while valuable, distracted U.S. resources and funding away from where it should have been focused.

Thus, the administration approached the first stage of the conflict in a very ad-hoc manner and throughout this period, there was some confusion and mixed messaging by and between the members of the administration. In May of 2012, in a story on CNN a US official described the US position “in “a holding pattern,” waiting for Russia to abandon its support for President Bashar al-Assad, waiting for sanctions to topple the economy and waiting for an organized Syrian opposition to present a coherent vision for a post-Assad Syria.”<sup>303</sup> As August 2012 approached, it was quite clear that Syria would not experience an operation similar to the one in Libya. Though President Obama waited to call on Assad to step down at the request and advice of the interagency community, he heeded the advice of his core team of political advisors to make the decision to issue the August 2011 statement. There was very little consulting with various other agencies or departments during this period.

<sup>301</sup> “The Day After Project: Supporting a Democratic Transition in Syria,” *The Day After*, August 2012, <http://www.usip.org/the-day-after-project>.

<sup>302</sup> Anonymous, interview by Kilic Kanat, July 2014.

<sup>303</sup> Labott, Elise, “U.S. in waiting game in Syria,” *CNN*, May 16, 2012, <http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2012/05/16/u-s-in-waiting-game-on-syria/>

## **FIVE** OBAMA'S RED LINE (AUGUST 2012-AUGUST 2013)

- ■ The red line speech was another demonstration of the White House's approach to foreign policy making: the message came before a strategy or a plan of action about what to do in case of a chemical weapons attack.



“We have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus.”<sup>304</sup>

*President Obama, August 20, 2012*

In August 2012, President Obama issued a statement that would serve as yet another major turning point on the U.S.’s position on Syria. The statement arrived in the midst of mounting reports and concerns over the Assad regime’s alleged use of weapons of mass destruction against civilians. A number of questions raised by policymakers were concerned with the potential U.S. reaction if the reports were validated. Soon after, in response to these speculations, President Obama stated, “We have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus...That would change my equation...We’re monitoring that situation very carefully. We have put together a range of contingency plans.”<sup>305</sup> The language was not unprecedented, the armed forces had been using the phrase “red line” about chemical weapons in Syria since at least July; and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton also used the phrase for the first time in

<sup>304</sup> Claudette Roulo, “Little: Syrian Chemical Weapons Appear Secure,” *Department of Defense News*, July 13, 2012, <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=117118>; See also “Hillary Clinton on Syria: use of chemical weapons is a red line – video,” *The Guardian*, August 11, 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2012/aug/11/hillary-clinton-syria-chemical-weapons-video>.

<sup>305</sup> Ball, “Obama issues Syria a ‘red line’ warning on chemical weapons.”

a speech just days before the President's statement.<sup>306</sup> During a press conference in Turkey, Secretary Clinton said that the U.S. was working on the necessary contingency plans, including a response for the potential use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime, which should be considered a "red line" for the world. Secretary Clinton also mentioned that they needed to plan for the possibility that these weapons would be used, specifically how to provide the necessary humanitarian and medical aid and how to contain those stocks.<sup>307</sup> As mentioned previously, the Pentagon was already working on potential plans and scenarios to deal with chemical weapons.

President Obama's statement, however, came as a surprise to many in the administration who had not been alerted to the solidifying of this position. According to members of the State Department, the administration had only begun communicating within the interagency and with U.S. allies about the likelihood and repercussions of a large-scale chemical weapons attack. President Obama's public declaration of the U.S.' position seemed premature and absent of further consultation with cabinet agencies.<sup>308</sup> Its introduction in the administration led U.S. policymakers to take the President's comment as a directive meant to reorient the focus of its policy in Syria to chemical weapons.<sup>309</sup> The move made sense given the lack of progress in other negotiations. The use of chemical weapons was considered a legal issue that would not require U.S. entanglement in Syrian affairs but also had enough relation to Iranian non-proliferation negotiations to warrant the country's interest. Probably, the only exception to this situation took place a month before President Obama's statement, when a bomb exploded during

<sup>306</sup> Claudette Roulo, "Little: Syrian Chemical Weapons Appear Secure," *Department of Defense News*, July 13, 2012, <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=117118>; See also "Hillary Clinton on Syria: use of chemical weapons is a red line – video," *The Guardian*, August 11, 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2012/aug/11/hillary-clinton-syria-chemical-weapons-video>.

<sup>307</sup> "Hillary Clinton Warns Assad 'Chemical Weapons Use will be Red Line,'" *YouTube*, August 11, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdXckFEZkt4>.

<sup>308</sup> Anonymous, interview by Kilic Kanat, July 2014.

<sup>309</sup> Anonymous, interview by Kilic Kanat, July 2014.

a meeting of top-level security and military officials in the Syrian National Security Headquarters. Among those killed were senior security and military officials, including Defense Minister Dawoud Rajiha, Assef Shawkat—Deputy Defense Minister and the brother-in-law of Assad—and Hisham Ikhtiyar, the Director of National Security Bureau. The attack wounded dozens, reportedly including the brother of Assad, Maher Assad, who also serves as the commander of the Republican Guards. Many in Washington were alarmed by this development, since nobody was expecting such a major blow from the opposition, which was considered too inept to conduct a military operation in Damascus. Those in the administration who favored a policy change considered the attack a possible game-changing blow to the regime in Damascus. However, there were no subsequent attacks that could decapitate the regime and generate more defections from Damascus.

Following the red line speech, a statement was issued by the State Department about allegations of chemical weapons usage in Syria. It confirmed that Syria had stockpiles of chemical weapons composed of nerve agents and mustards gas.<sup>310</sup> Later in September 2012, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta responded to questions on the use of chemical weapons by saying that the intelligence community had discovered limited movement of chemical weapons in Syria. According to him, most of the Syrian regime's chemical weapons were secured, although there were a few stockpiles unaccounted for. There seemed to be no information on the whereabouts of these chemical weapons stockpiles.<sup>311</sup> Following his statements, allegations emerged from the international community that chemical weapons had indeed been used in Syria. The assertion had already been made several times by the Syrian opposition, which could not be confirmed by independent sources throughout the summer of 2012. In part, what made the

<sup>310</sup> "Timeline of Syrian Chemical Weapons Activity, 2012-2014," Arms Control Association, July 2014, <http://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Timeline-of-Syrian-Chemical-Weapons-Activity>.

<sup>311</sup> Lolita C. Baldor, "Syria Chemical Weapons Moved, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta Says," *The Huffington Post*, September 28, 2012, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/28/syria-chemical-weapons-moved-panetta\\_n\\_1923159.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/28/syria-chemical-weapons-moved-panetta_n_1923159.html).

administration react were the claims that chemical weapons were being moved by regime forces.<sup>312</sup> Following these unconfirmed reports, the first strong allegation of chemical weapons usage by the Syrian regime was provided in October 2012 by the government of France as having occurred in the Syrian town of Salquin, positioned near the Turkish border.<sup>313</sup>

According to observers of the Obama administration's Syria policy, the red line speech was another demonstration of the White House's mishandled approach to foreign policy making. Once again, the message came before a strategy or a plan of action about what to do in case of a chemical weapons attack. It is because of this that the administration had a hard time figuring out an action plan after each and every allegation of chemical weapon use. In several different speeches and statements, President Obama repeated his "red line" position. For the members of the administration, the message sounded enough like a deterrent and provided another cost and risk-free opportunity to stay out of the conflict in Syria, while also preventing the breach a significant international and humanitarian norm. Moreover, the statement was regarded as an assurance by U.S. allies in the region. Following this, however, some U.S. allies that had been imploring the U.S. for years to set a similar "red line" for the Iranian nuclear program expressed their disappointment for the lack of similar statements against Iran.

President Obama, starting with the August statement, made the chemical weapons issue an important talking point of his stance on Syria. In December 2012, President Obama reiterated his position in a speech at the National War College. He underlined all the positions that he endorsed since the beginning of the crisis in Syria:

...Let me just say this. We will continue to support the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people—engaging with the opposition, providing with—providing them with the humanitarian aid, and working for a transition to a

<sup>312</sup> "Syrian Rebels Claim Regime is Sending Chemical Arms to Borders," *NTI*, July 24, 2012, <http://www.nti.org/gsn/article/syrian-rebels-claim-regime-sending-chemical-arms-borders/>.

<sup>313</sup> "United Nations Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic," United Nations, September 13, 2013, <https://unoda-web.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/report.pdf>.

Syria that's free of the Assad regime. And today, I want to make it absolutely clear to Assad and those under his command: The world is watching. The use of chemical weapons is and would be totally unacceptable. And if you make the tragic mistake of using these weapons, there where be consequences, and you will be held accountable.<sup>314</sup>

In Prague, Secretary Clinton hedged the position saying, "I am not going to telegraph in any specifics what we would do in the event of credible evidence that the Assad regime has resorted to using chemical weapons against their own people, but suffice it to say we are certainly planning to take action if that eventuality were to occur."<sup>315</sup> The growing number of questions for U.S. officials on chemical weapons in Syria was a result of the increasing number of reports in the media suggesting that the Syrian regime was, in fact, moving around its chemical weapon stockpiles.

The fact that the President issued another "red line" statement after his electoral win in November held significant repercussions for both the Syrian opposition and U.S. allies in the region. Throughout 2012, because of the U.S. Presidential Elections, the international community had low expectations for the administration in terms of real action on Syria, especially regarding possible military engagement. What they did anticipate was a major move on this issue following the elections. In the summer of 2012, it was reported that the Syrian opposition was especially pessimistic about the possible military support of the Obama administration during the election season. The opposition's sentiments were well outlined in a *Telegraph* story which also indicated that the White House had refused to provide military and intelligence support to the Syrian opposition.<sup>316</sup>

<sup>314</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President at the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Symposium," Press Release, December 3, 2012, (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/12/03/remarks-president-nunn-lugar-cooperative-threat-reduction-symposium>.

<sup>315</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Video Remarks on Syria," Remarks, December 3, 2012 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2012/12/199997.htm>.

<sup>316</sup> Peter Foster, "US refuses to help Syrian rebels until after election," *The Telegraph*, July 16, 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/9404452/US-refuses-to-help-Syrian-rebels-until-after-election.html>.

Lobbyists working for various groups went on the record saying that, “Basically the message is very clear; nothing is going to happen until after the election, in fact nothing will happen until after inauguration [January 20, 2013]. And that is the same message coming from everyone, including the Turks and the Qataris.”<sup>317</sup> However, yet again there was contradictory reporting about U.S. support for opposition groups. On the one hand there were the reports emphasizing that the White House had made it clear that it would not provide military assistance for Syrian groups until after the elections.<sup>318</sup> On the other hand, *The New York Times* reported that a small number of CIA officers were working in southern Turkey to vet Syrian opposition groups that were slated to receive arms and military support from the Americans.<sup>319</sup> This situation led to general confusion among the members of the opposition as well as U.S. allies in the region.

Although President Obama never signaled that there would be a policy change after the elections—and though he made some statements hinting to his Syria policy during presidential debates—interested parties on Syria never took him seriously. For example, during President Obama’s foreign policy debate with Romney he argued that, although he was committed to the idea that Assad must go, it would be hard for the U.S. to intervene in the conflict militarily. Speaking on the prospect of directly arming the rebels, he said that the U.S. needed to be extremely cautious on both who and how to arm. More importantly, little criticism or pressure was directed at President Obama by the Republican presidential candidate, Mitt Romney, which suggested that, even if the Republicans had won the White House a more aggressive course of action in Syria was unlikely. Romney also did not want to seem like yet another Republican presidential candidate in favor of using of unilateral military force to force regime change in another

<sup>317</sup> Ibid.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid.

<sup>319</sup> Schmitt, Eric, “C.I.A. Said to Aid in Steering Arms to Syrian Opposition,” *The New York Times*, June 21, 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/21/world/middleeast/cia-said-to-aid-in-steering-arms-to-syrian-rebels.html?\\_r=3&ref=middleeast&pagewanted=print](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/21/world/middleeast/cia-said-to-aid-in-steering-arms-to-syrian-rebels.html?_r=3&ref=middleeast&pagewanted=print).

er country in the Middle East. Because of that, both candidates avoided talking in length about the situation in Syria, despite the deterioration of the situation on the ground. The wishful thinking among regional allies and the Syrian opposition was based on the expectation that President Obama would become more assertive after the elections.<sup>320</sup>

At the same time, there were indications in some areas that the administration was increasing its involvement on the issue. In the wake of elections, the U.S. made an important attempt to restructure the opposition and reorganize the coalition in a meeting in Doha, which was considered the boldest move of the administration since the beginning of the civil war in Syria.<sup>321</sup> When President Obama stated in late December that the U.S. formally recognized Syria's main opposition coalition as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people,<sup>322</sup> the hopes for a change in U.S. policy skyrocketed dramatically. The announcement came ahead of a Friends of Syria conference in Morocco, which the Syrian National Coalition attended for the first time. Against this backdrop, according to many opposition groups, there was little reason not to expect a more forceful push by the U.S. to end the conflict.<sup>323</sup>

In the period after his election for a second term, another major factor that influenced the President's Syria policy was the September 2012 attack on the U.S. Embassy in Benghazi. The attack in Libya, the death of the U.S. ambassador to Benghazi, and the ensuing political fallout from the incident was a major, contentious issue within U.S. domestic politics. Although not directly related to the conflict in Syria, the fact that the attack

<sup>320</sup> Sam Stein, "Mitt Romney, Obama Spar Over Syria," *The Huffington Post*, October 22, 2012, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/22/romney-obama-syria-debate\\_n\\_2003918.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/22/romney-obama-syria-debate_n_2003918.html).

<sup>321</sup> Mike Giglio, "Post Election, Obama Gambles on Syrian Rebels," *The Daily Beast*, November 10, 2012, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/11/10/post-election-obama-gambles-on-syrian-rebels.html>.

<sup>322</sup> "US recognizes Syria opposition coalition says Obama," *BBC News*, December 12, 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-20690148>.

<sup>323</sup> Mike Giglio, "How the U.S. Election Helps Syria," *The Daily Beast*, November 7, 2012, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/11/07/how-the-u-s-election-helps-syria.html>.

took place in a country where the U.S. was militarily involved in order to help the opposition resulted in a comparison between both cases. It was widely reported that President Obama had been against involvement in Libya until certain members of his cabinet convinced the President to take action.<sup>324</sup> However, the outcome was far worse than expected. After what happened in Benghazi, President Obama's preference to avoid military involvement in the crises of the Middle East increased. In fact, after the specter of the Iraq War, the ghost of the Benghazi episode became a strong second factor for President Obama's reluctance in Syria. The embassy attack, the murder of Ambassador Stevens, the controversy following the attack, the media scrutiny, and the Congressional investigation generated a pool of complications for the Obama administration. After the Benghazi attack, those who were against military intervention attempted to accentuate commonalities between Libya and Syria, arguing that military intervention in Syria could not be an option. President Obama, later in the last year of his presidency in different interviews expressed this issue as the most significant challenge of his presidency.<sup>325</sup>

In addition to the Libya attack, another factor that influenced U.S. policy towards Syria was a reshuffling of the President's foreign policy team for his second term in office. Both Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who prepared the plan to arm rebels in early 2012, and Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, who supported Clinton's plan of action, left their offices. The new Secretary of Defense, Chuck Hagel, was considered more cautious about the use of force. The administration's policy on Syria was mostly run by the new Secretary of State, John Kerry. Secretary Kerry, starting from his years in the Senate, held an interest in Syria and had visited the country and met with Assad on multiple occasions. Especially after the Obama administration's engagement with Syria in 2009, Senator Kerry

<sup>324</sup> Ryan Lizza, "The Consequentialist," *The New Yorker*, May 2, 2011, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/05/02/the-consequentialist>.

<sup>325</sup> Goldberg, Jeffrey, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, April 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

had visited Damascus on multiple occasions in a very short span of time. After the violent crackdown against demonstrators in Syria in early 2011, Senator Kerry continued expressing hope about the possibility of Assad being a reformer until mid-2011. Now, two years after the beginning of the uprising, Kerry occupied the seat of Secretary of State and wanted to pursue an assertive foreign policy that would change the situation on the ground. He was particularly proactive in trying to find a framework for negotiations to bring together the opposition and the regime in his first month in office. However, these attempts did not generate a meaningful outcome that could change the conflict's equation. It was also revealed that, other than these diplomatic endeavors, U.S. foreign policy did not have a plan B to tackle the crisis and did not have any intention of becoming more involved in the conflict with riskier options.<sup>326</sup>

While the U.S. foreign policy team was being reorganized, different reports about the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime continued. The first of these was a *Foreign Policy* report from a secret State Department cable that pointed to an indication of chemical weapons usage by the Syrian government in Homs. Both the State Department and the White House disputed the report.<sup>327</sup> Later, *Le Monde* released a more comprehensive report, where its reporters in Syria claimed to have individually witnessed the regime's chemical attacks near the outskirts of Damascus. Reporters saw the effects of several attacks when the fighters of the FSA began displaying symptoms, such as shrinking pupils, blurred vision, breathing difficulties, vomiting and loss of consciousness. A *Le Monde* reporter was one of those exposed to the chemical weapons in April 2013. He experienced blurred vision and respiratory problems for the next four days. The *Le Monde* report also indicated the increasing frequency of these types of chemical attacks by regime forces against the FSA. In particular,

<sup>326</sup> Gayle Lemmon, "Kerry's Syrian Quagmire," *Foreign Policy*, May 31, 2013, <http://foreign-policy.com/2013/05/31/kerrys-syrian-quagmire/>.

<sup>327</sup> BBC, "US recognizes Syria opposition coalition says Obama," December 12, 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-20690148>.

attacks took place in three areas of the Damascus region: Adra, Otaiba and Jobar.<sup>328</sup> There were differences in both the density and the frequency of the use of gas in the respective areas, but there was no dispute that all three localities had witnessed gas attacks. Furthermore, the *Le Monde* report put forward an important warning about the goals of these chemical attacks: “The aim of the attacks seemed to be essentially tactical at this stage—an attempt to destabilize rebel units in areas where government soldiers have been unable to dislodge them, and at the same time a test. If Syrian army forces could dare to use chemical weapons in their own capital without setting off a serious international reaction, would that not be an invitation to pursue the experiment a bit further?”<sup>329</sup> The warning did not seem to generate any serious reaction in Western capitals. Later throughout the spring of 2013, more reports and allegations emerged, this time occurring in other localities, including Idlib, Aleppo, Hama and Rif Dimashq. The UN mission was unable to verify these allegations, yet similar reports continued to mount throughout these months.

The first official U.S. announcement following allegations of chemical weapons usage came in April 2013, almost four months after the first reports of attacks. In a letter to Congress, the White House claimed, “the U.S. believes with some degree of varying confidence” that the Syrian regime used chemical weapons against its own people.<sup>330</sup> The White House’s statement was based on physiological samples. The administration asked the UN to probe the allegations. The statement also asserted, “We are continuing to do further work to establish a definitive judgment as to whether or not the red line has been crossed and to inform our decision-making

<sup>328</sup> Jean-Philippe Rémy, “Chemical warfare in Syria,” *Le Monde*, June 5, 2013, [http://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2013/05/27/chemical-war-in-syria\\_3417708\\_3218.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2013/05/27/chemical-war-in-syria_3417708_3218.html).

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>330</sup> Kristen Welker, Jim Miklaszewski, Courtney Kube and Tracy Connor, “White House: US believes Syrian regime used chemical weapons,” *NBC News*, April 25, 2013, [http://usnews.nbcnews.com/\\_news/2013/04/25/17913974-white-house-us-believes-syrian-regime-used-chemical-weapons?lite](http://usnews.nbcnews.com/_news/2013/04/25/17913974-white-house-us-believes-syrian-regime-used-chemical-weapons?lite).

about what we'll do next."<sup>331</sup> Both the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense confirmed the findings in a letter in the aftermath of the statement's release.<sup>332</sup> The letter was considered a significant development in U.S. policy towards Syria. In several instances, the countries in the region and the Syrian opposition alleged that chemical agents had been used by the Syrian regime. President Obama's "red line" speech was regarded as a serious commitment by the U.S. government to deter and—if used—punish the Syrian regime. The call by the U.S. for the UN to investigate the use of chemical weapons and its statements to further probe the allegations signaled a high-level of sensitivity, which might lead to a potential change in U.S. policy. However, at the same time, the administration's insistence on obtaining further evidence of the presence of chemical agents also reflected the inclination to avoid any intelligence failure like what was witnessed during the Iraq War. Because of that, the administration was extremely cautious.<sup>333</sup> The political and diplomatic moves by the U.S. and the international community were perceived as sufficient on their own to deter Assad.<sup>334</sup>

Reactions to the allegations of the use of chemical weapons in Syria failed to bear any hint of consensus in statements by the various members of the administration. Then Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel has since spoken of the moment he received the order from President Obama to stand down in the face of overwhelming confirmation of the regime's use of chemical weapons. Prior to this order, the Department of Defense was already in the final stages of planning Tomahawk cruise missile strikes against regime

<sup>331</sup> Ibid.

<sup>332</sup> Chuck Hagel, "Statement on Syria," Press Release, April 25, 2013 (online by U.S. Department of Defense), <http://www.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1773>.

<sup>333</sup> Michael Eisenstadt, "Investigating Alleged Chemical Weapons Use in Syria: Technical and Political Challenges," The Washington Institute, Policywatch 2072, April 26, 2013, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/investigating-alleged-chemical-weapons-use-in-syria-technical-and-political>.

<sup>334</sup> John Kerry, "Press Availability on Syria," Remarks, February 28, 2013 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/02/205435.htm>.

forces in Damascus to uphold the President's "red line" policy. The decision not to react to breaches of the "red line" was, according to administrative officials, made because of the President's desire for Congressional support before embarking on military operations.<sup>335</sup> During the spring of 2013, various administration officials made multiple and sometimes confusing statements in speeches and in writings. In February, Leon Panetta, in his final appearance before Congress as Secretary of Defense, answered a question about arming the Syrian rebels and a possible U.S. military intervention by mentioning the 2012 Clinton-Petraeus plan to arm the rebels. He claimed that he and General Dempsey had both supported the plan. This statement was the first time that a member of the administration admitted to endorsing a plan to arm the rebels in Syria.<sup>336</sup> Part of it was an endorsement to vet, arm and train moderate rebels in Syria affiliated with the FSA as a way to balance the growing al-Qaeda presence by instilling greater confidence among locals as well as the international community and attracting support. Overcome with a bad case of what Ambassador Hof called "Iraq Syndrome," which had only been exacerbated at this point by the NATO intervention in Libya, the President had no desire to engage militarily in Syria.<sup>337</sup>

President Obama's decision not to operationalize this plan revealed the growing interagency divide over Syria policy within the Obama administration. In a February 2013 congressional hearing, Senator John McCain said that he was disappointed that Obama "overruled the senior leaders of his own national security team, who were in unanimous agreement that America needs to take greater action to change the military balance of power in Syria," and that if there was "another time in history when

<sup>335</sup> Mark Mazzetti and Matt Apuzzo, "U.S. Relies Heavily on Saudi Money to Support Syrian Rebels," *The New York Times*, January 23, 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/24/world/middleeast/us-relies-heavily-on-saudi-money-to-support-syrian-rebels.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/24/world/middleeast/us-relies-heavily-on-saudi-money-to-support-syrian-rebels.html?_r=0).

<sup>336</sup> Jon Swaine, "Leon Panetta supports Hillary Clinton plan to arm Syrian rebels," *The Telegraph*, February 7, 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9856382/Leon-Panetta-supports-Hillary-Clinton-plan-to-arm-Syrian-rebels.html>.

<sup>337</sup> Frederic Hof, "Frederic Hof Criticizes Obama Administration's 'Iraq Syndrome,'" *The Atlantic Council*, August 22, 2013, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/news/in-the-news/frederic-hof-quoted-in-the-economist>.

a President's entire national-security team recommended a course of action and he overruled them...I'm not aware of it."<sup>338</sup> However, President Obama's new foreign policy team was quick to point to the new direction. Secretary of State John Kerry explained that the best solution for Syria was a political one and that the U.S. was working towards this goal by trying to bring together another international conference that would include the warring parties.<sup>339</sup> Yet, shortly after this statement, the new Secretary of Defense, Chuck Hagel, claimed that all options were still on the table and that the U.S. could take different measures in order to deal with the conflict.<sup>340</sup> According to SNC representatives, it was mostly the Obama administration's inner circle that was not convinced by any option that other members of the administration brought forward. There were clear indications that both Secretary Clinton and Secretary Kerry were sympathetic to arming the opposition and had seriously tried to convince the White House. However, the President did not want to initiate these plans at that time.<sup>341</sup> In a 2015 interview, Secretary Hagel said that White House meetings were routinely unproductive. Meetings continually were hung up on small matters and pushed back making tough decisions. At one point, Secretary Hagel says he wrote a two-page memo to administration officials outlining pressure he was getting from allies about the administration's strategy. He argued that the administration desperately needed to formulate a coherent strategy on Syria<sup>342</sup>.

<sup>338</sup> Michael Gordon and Mark Landler, "Senate Hearing Draws Out a Rift in U.S. Policy on Syria," *The New York Times*, February 7, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/08/us/politics/panetta-speaks-to-senate-panel-on-benghazi-attack.html?pagewanted=all>; See also Dexter Filkins, "The Thin Red Line," *The New Yorker*, May 13, 2013, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/05/13/the-thin-red-line-2>.

<sup>339</sup> John Kerry, "Press Availability on Syria," February 28, 2013.

<sup>340</sup> Lolita C. Baldor, "Hagel: US rethinking possibly arming rebels," *U.S. News*, May 2, 2013, <http://www.usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2013/05/02/hagel-us-rethinking-possibly-arming-rebels>.

<sup>341</sup> Radwan Ziadeh, interview by Kilic Kanat,

<sup>342</sup> Dan de Luce, "Hagel: The White House Tried to 'Destroy' me," *Foreign Policy*, December 18, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/12/18/hagel-the-white-house-tried-to-destroy-me/>.

Reportedly, President Obama's opinion on lethal aid changed in June 2013 when the investigators found intractable evidence of chemical attacks perpetrated by the regime. They were small in scale, but their very existence was apparently reason enough to cause the administration serious concern. Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes declared in June, "The President has said that the use of chemical weapons would change his calculus, and it has."<sup>343</sup> The claim was true but incomplete. The use of chemical weapons justified U.S. efforts to give lethal aid to the rebels, but it was not because of the egregiousness of the attacks; senior State Department officials stated that the attacks at that point had failed to stir any grand response from the White House, save for inspiring further discussions to get allies to apply greater diplomatic pressure on Assad.<sup>344</sup> Instead, it appears more likely that the U.S. increased its support to demonstrate to its allies that it had "skin in the game," a vested interest in the opposition's success. The United States' move to arm rebels came just as Saudi Arabia and Jordan excluded the U.S. from a rebel-training program out of a belief that it was holding reservations about the strength of its commitment.<sup>345</sup> Thus, military aid was wielded as a tool to propel political cooperation with U.S. allies going forward. In addition, this period also coincided with the increasing influence of Hezbollah and Iran in the Syrian conflict. For instance, Ben Rhodes, pointing to this increasing Iranian influence stated, "There's urgency to the situation. There has been urgency to the situation for two years. It's particularly urgent right now in terms of the situation on the ground, in some respect, because we have seen Hezbollah and Iran increase their own involvement in the conflict,

<sup>343</sup> Mark Mazzetti, Michael Gordon and Mark Landler, "U.S. Is Said to Plan to Send Weapons to Syrian Rebels," *The New York Times*, June 13, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/14/world/middleeast/syria-chemical-weapons.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>344</sup> Anonymous, interview by Kilic Kanat, July 2014.

<sup>345</sup> Mazzetti, Gordon and Landler, "U.S. Is Said to Plan to Send Weapons to Syrian Rebels"; See also Adam Entous and Nour Malas, "U.S. Still Hasn't Armed Syrian Rebels," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 2, 2013, <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887324202304579051280341316034>.

and that has caused an influx of additional fighters to the conflict. And so that has added an element of urgency.”<sup>346</sup>

In a statement, Rhodes claimed that the intelligence community, according to the multiple and independent streams of information, assessed that the regime used chemical weapons multiple times in 2012. He also stated that “the United States and the international community have a number of other legal, financial, diplomatic and military responses available” and that the U.S. is prepared for all contingencies and will make decisions on its own timeline.<sup>347</sup> However, this announcement failed to end the dispute over the conflict in Syria among different members of the administration. Reportedly, immediately after the announcement, deep-seated divisions emerged within the administration over U.S. involvement. Secretary Kerry was among the proponents of more aggressive action, but President Obama opposed putting American troops on the ground in Syria and the administration had not made any decisions on operating a no-fly zone.<sup>348</sup> In leaked minutes from a strategy meeting, Secretary Kerry and General Dempsey had a heated debate over possible operations in Syria. Secretary Kerry endorsed a plan that involved immediate U.S. airstrikes against Syrian airfields, specifically those that might be used for launching chemical weapons attacks against opposition forces. Dempsey had argued that such an operation would be too complex and that there was still no clear entrance or exit strategy or enough understanding of the consequences of such an action for the United States.<sup>349</sup> This division and lack of co-

<sup>346</sup> Josh Rogin, “Obama’s Syria Aid: Too Late?” *The Daily Beast*, June 13, 2013, <http://www.dailybeast.com/articles/2013/06/13/obama-s-syria-aid-too-late.html>.

<sup>347</sup> Ben Rhodes, “Statement by Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes on Syrian Chemical Weapons Use,” Press Release, June 13, 2013 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/06/13/statement-deputy-national-security-advisor-strategic-communications-ben->

<sup>348</sup> Matthew Lee and Julie Pace, “Obama Authorizes Sending Weapons To Syrian Rebels,” *The Huffington Post*, June 13, 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/13/obama-syrian-rebels\\_n\\_3438625.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/13/obama-syrian-rebels_n_3438625.html).

<sup>349</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg, “Pentagon Shoots Down Kerry’s Syria Airstrike Plan,” *Bloomberg View*, June 18, 2013, <http://www.bloombergview.com/articles/2013-06-18/pentagon-shoots-down-kerry-s-syria-airstrike-plan>.

ordination was also reflected in bureaucratic circles. The administration failed to put together a structure, let alone a body, responsible for setting an agenda on Syria. An administration official told Gordon Lubold of *Foreign Policy* that he was quite saddened that after two and a half years, there was no sign of an effective, efficient, and organized interagency task force.<sup>350</sup>

Adding to the disagreements over airstrikes within the administration, there was no coordination to operationalize military support or the arming of opposition groups. A CIA and special operations training program was put together to train Syrian rebels on the use of anti-aircraft weaponry and an encrypted communications program. A 2016 report by *The New York Times* outlines that the major source of money and weaponry for this program, titled Timber Sycamore, was supplied largely by Saudi Arabia, but also received covert funding from other U.S. partners; Qatar, Jordan, and Turkey.<sup>351</sup> The program was expected to expand in order to cover the training and arming of rebels as well.<sup>352</sup> However, throughout the summer of 2013, little information was ever put forth on how to coordinate and plan the effort to arm the Syrian rebels. This interagency divide on arming the rebels was further reflected in news reports. For instance, some anonymous sources from the administration stated that the new aid package would not include lethal arms, and was limited only to military items that could increase the effectiveness of rebels on the ground. In the same report, a second administration official claimed that President Obama might decide to provide lethal weapons to the Syrian opposition without informing large parts of the national security bureaucracy due to its secret nature.<sup>353</sup> A third administration official—senior this time—explained the nature of the assistance to the Syrian opposition as symbolic. According to him, the

<sup>350</sup> Gordon Lubold, "Is Anyone In Charge Of U.S. Syria Policy?," June 20, 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/06/20/is-anyone-in-charge-of-u-s-syria-policy/>.

<sup>351</sup> Mark Mazzetti and Matt Apuzzo, "U.S. Relies Heavily on Saudi Money to Support Syrian Rebels," *The New York Times*, January 23, 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/24/world/middleeast/us-relies-heavily-on-saudi-money-to-support-syrian-rebels.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/24/world/middleeast/us-relies-heavily-on-saudi-money-to-support-syrian-rebels.html?_r=0).

<sup>352</sup> Lee and Julie Pace, "Obama Authorizes Sending Weapons To Syrian Rebels."

<sup>353</sup> Rogin, "Obama's Syria Aid: Too Late?"

announcement had the potential to shift “the emotional balance by giving the rebels hope and making Syrian President Bashar al-Assad fear that his opposition will become a more formidable force.”<sup>354</sup>

Later, NSA advisor Philip Gordon would say of this wavering,

I came to the conclusion as early as late 2013 that we were pursuing a policy that had very little chance of working, and at very high cost. And that the costs of seeking a de-escalation and diplomatic engagement that would stop short of our ultimate political objective—removing the regime—were much less than the cost of perpetuating a policy that couldn't work... The problem is that our policy was in fact to “change the equation on the ground.” And our policy was to support the opposition to the point that it was strong enough to lead the regime and its backers to come to the table and negotiate away the regime. And that was an unrealistic objective. And so ultimately where we ended up was with a political objective that couldn't be achieved by using the means that we were prepared to use.<sup>355</sup>

Gordon lamented about the administration often being skeptical of their own policy, questioning whether they were doing things “just to show we were doing something,” rather than creating achievable objectives.

Yet, the United States was not timely in delivering that aid, delaying much of it until the spring of 2014. The setback cast doubts over the sincerity of the proposal and contributed to the declining of U.S. credibility among the Syrian opposition. It also added to the deterioration of relations with regional partners. Even when the aid was delivered, it did little to change the balance of power on the ground. Critics and administration officials alike asserted that this push was ineffective by design, as Al-Qaeda-related groups were getting stronger and the political opposition was incapable of leading. For a group of people in Washington, Assad was arguably the only source of stability capable of preventing the state institutions from crumbling. They believed that Assad was the only chance to avoid the collapse of the country into a safe haven for terrorist groups. According to

<sup>354</sup> James Traub, “Terms Of Engagement: Is Doing Something in Syria Better than Nothing?,” *Foreign Policy*, June 14, 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/06/14/is-doing-something-in-syria-better-than-nothing/>.

<sup>355</sup> Goldberg, Jeffrey, “Obama's Former Middle East Advisor: We Should Have Bombed Assad,” *The Atlantic*, April 20, 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/04/philip-gordon-barack-obama-doctrine/479031/>.

senior military officers, the Pentagon was expressly told not to draft military strike options that would facilitate Assad's ousting, as it would leave a power vacuum in the country.<sup>356</sup> Even General Dempsey repeatedly approached Congress to iterate his concern that Assad's removal from power would inevitably strengthen al-Qaeda and its affiliates.<sup>357</sup> Therefore, the United States deliberately failed to pick the opposition as the winner, allowing for the development of a war of attrition in Syria, while simultaneously fostering an atmosphere of impunity for the Assad regime. In making his decision on whether to arm the opposition, President Obama made a unilateral decision, isolating himself inside his own administration.

<sup>356</sup> Entous and Malas, "U.S. Still Hasn't Armed Syrian Rebels."

<sup>357</sup> *Ibid.*

## SIX A NEW CALCULUS (AUGUST 2013-AUGUST 2014)

- ■ Some U.S. allies in the region as well as many members of the Syrian opposition saw the shift as an effort to backpedal on the plan, either to deflect blame in the event of failure or to use the polarized Congress to prevent its approval all together.



“Now, after careful deliberation, I have decided that the United States should take military action against Syrian regime targets...I will seek authorization for the use of force from the American people's representatives in Congress.”<sup>358</sup>

*President Obama, August 31, 2013*

On August 21, 2013, President Obama's "red line" statement was challenged in the largest incident of chemical weapons use in the conflict to-date, killing up to an estimated 1,400 people in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta. Other chemical attacks had been reported in November 2012 and March and April 2013, but this latest attack was both the largest and the most well reported. In addition to the high number of casualties, the aftermath of the attacks and the affected patients' conditions were recorded and distributed through social media. The news of the attack was quickly circulated around the world. The attack in Ghouta was impossible to ignore and warranted the involvement of the White House. It was a shocking incident for the Obama administration because many in the White House believed that the red line speech had been a major deterrent against the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons. Furthermore, ever since the red line statement, the Obama administration had sent messages to both Iran and Russia outlining the possible consequences of the use of these weapons.<sup>359</sup>

<sup>358</sup> Barack Obama, "Statement by the President on Syria," Press Release, August 31, 2013 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/08/31/statement-president-syria>.

<sup>359</sup> Peter Baker, Mark Landler, David Sanger and Anne Barnard, "Off-the-Cuff Obama Line Put U.S. in Bind on Syria," *The New York Times*, May 4, 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/05/world/middleeast/obamas-vow-on-chemical-weapons-puts-him-in-tough-spot.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/05/world/middleeast/obamas-vow-on-chemical-weapons-puts-him-in-tough-spot.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0) .

Although there were previous intelligence reports about the use of these weapons, the time between the attacks and the confirmation of the use of chemical agents was such that the issue was no longer on the agenda. In addition, in previous attacks, finding conclusive evidence about the use of chemical weapons was difficult. According to rebel forces, in one particular instance, after a chemical weapons attack by Syrian regime forces,

American intelligence officers in Jordan were provided two sets of hair, soil and urine samples from each of three contested areas near Damascus where rebels have accused the government of using chemical weapons. After positive tests... the officers asked for a third sample, but it could not be delivered along an impassable road.<sup>360</sup>

The attack in Ghouta, however, was much different. YouTube videos were circulated on social media in the immediate aftermath of the attack, clearly demonstrating that victims were suffering from exposure to a chemical agents, including difficulty breathing, convulsions, and foaming of the mouth. According to experts, this kind of initial visual evidence undeniably pointed to the use of chemical weapons.<sup>361</sup>

All the eyes again turned to the United States and President Obama, who had made his redline statement exactly one year earlier. According to many, if the Ghouta attack was also substantiated by intelligence reports, this was a clear violation of the red line set forth by the President himself and necessitated a swift U.S. response. First, the attack was a grave violation of international chemical weapons bans and international norms. As the global superpower, the United States, with backing from the international community, needed to act in order to sanction those who used these weapons. Second, the attack cast a shadow over the Iranian nuclear negotiations, which President Obama had been pushing as a foreign policy priority. If the United States failed to follow through on its 2012 threat against Syria, the country's credibility would be damaged, thereby embold-

<sup>360</sup> Ibid.

<sup>361</sup> Dashiell Bennett, "The Visual Evidence of a Chemical Attack in Syria Is Overwhelming and Disturbing," *The Wire*, August 21, 2013, <http://www.thewire.com/global/2013/08/visual-evidence-syrias-poison-gas-attack-overwhelming-and-disturbing/68586/>.

ening U.S. enemies and shaking the faith of U.S. allies. Everyone in the administration, including the President, believed that the United States had to act. However, action never came. However some of the members of the administration later came out and criticized the last minute change of heart of President Obama. Commenting on the decision making process of the administration during this period, Philip Gordon, who held the NSC Middle East portfolio at the time, has said that he believes, in retrospect, that the President's red line should have been upheld. In an interview with *The Atlantic*, Gordon said, "The president said in 2012 that the use of chemical weapons was a red line for us. I think this threat actually worked for a time. This was in Assad's mind, and it led him not to use chemical weapons, at least on a large scale, for almost a year. So sometimes there's utility in putting down a marker like that." He continued, "My view was that while achieving a comprehensive political transition in Syria was a noble goal, we were not succeeding and we were unlikely to succeed and therefore the costs of pursuing that goal—dead people, refugees, destabilizing neighbors, radicalization, instability in Europe—were becoming far greater than the costs of de-escalation. But I was always told that our credibility was at stake, and that we couldn't stop halfway."<sup>362</sup>

The use of chemical weapons in Ghouta took place after almost a year long gradual increase in the intensity of use of the chemicals. According to a senior U.S. official, the Assad regime had been purposely increasing the number of deaths incurred by chemical weapons attacks as a way to test the U.S.' commitment to its "red line" threat. Yet the administration avoided responding to the reported attacks in late 2012 and early 2013, providing no deterrent to keep Assad from escalating his use of chemical weapons. As Senator John McCain has put forward, "Assad was able to use chemical weapons before and there was no response, and so why not do it again? This should surprise no one...[Syria] viewed that not as a red line but as a

<sup>362</sup> Goldberg, Jeffrey, "Obama's Former Middle East Adviser: We Should Have Bombed Assad," *The Atlantic*, April 20, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/04/philip-gordon-barack-obama-doctrine/479031/>.

green light...”<sup>363</sup> Members of the administration had already revealed that the “red line” statement was made without an interagency process and that it was another message without a pre-existing or prepared strategy. Because of that, President Obama never “deliberately explained what his red line actually is and how it would change his calculus.” A former defense policy advisor for President Obama was not convinced that the administration thought through the possible implications of such a statement. He said, “I am worried about the broader damage to U.S. credibility if we make a statement and then come back with lawyerly language to get around it.”<sup>364</sup>

Those who knew how the Assad regime operated believed that the administration should have foreseen and prepared for the likelihood of an even deadlier chemical attack with the potential to draw the U.S. deeper into the Syrian conflict. Instead, in what one State Department official called an “inexplicable lack of policy preparation,” the administration failed to draw up military contingency plans in the event that the U.S. was obligated to carry out its 2012 threat. Not only did the White House lack trust in the Pentagon after a series of leaks, but it was also certain enough of its own aversion to military action that it did not bother to seek defense counsel.<sup>365</sup> In addition to all this, there was a significant degree of desensitization to the violence and chaos of the Syrian conflict among the members of the administration.<sup>366</sup> According to a *New York Times* report, the overall atmosphere at the White House during meetings about Syria was described as very distracted and disinterested. The report stated, “Mr. Obama rarely voiced strong opinions during senior staff meetings. But current and former officials said his body language was telling: he often appeared impatient or disengaged while listening to the debate, sometimes

<sup>363</sup> Josh Rogin, “Exclusive: McCain Says Obama Gave ‘Green Light’ to Syria to Use Chemical Weapons,” *The Daily Beast*, August 27, 2013, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/08/27/exclusive-mccain-says-obama-gave-green-light-to-syria-to-use-chemical-weapons.html>.

<sup>364</sup> Baker et al.

<sup>365</sup> Glenn Thrush, “Locked in the Cabinet,” *Politico Magazine*, November 2013, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2013/11/locked-in-the-cabinet-99374.html#ixzz38LJVdmds>;

<sup>366</sup> Anonymous, interview by Kilic Kanat, July 2014.

scrolling through messages on his BlackBerry or slouching and chewing gum.”<sup>367</sup> The same report also suggested that there were even some administration officials within President Obama’s inner circle that favored the status quo in Syria. Accordingly, “accompanying a group of senior lawmakers on a day trip to the Guantánamo Bay naval base in early June, Mr. McDonough argued that the status quo in Syria could keep Iran pinned down for years. In later discussions, he also suggested that a fight in Syria between Hezbollah and Al Qaeda would work to America’s advantage, according to Congressional officials.”<sup>368</sup> Although many of these officials changed their position as a result of deteriorating conditions in Syria, they nevertheless stayed skeptical about any form of U.S. engagement in Syria.

After the distribution of the videos of the chemical weapon attack, the first reaction from the White House came in a statement requesting immediate access to witnesses and affected individuals to examine and collect physical evidence without any intervention from the Syrian government.<sup>369</sup> Meanwhile, the UNSC convened to discuss the attacks and potential responses to it. The international community focused on the U.S. reaction to the attacks, specifically due to President Obama’s “red line.” The tone of the first White House statement signaled an urgency and the potential for action by the United States. On the first day after the attack, the Obama administration stated that it could not verify the use of chemical weapons in Ghouta, requesting that intelligence agencies help confirm the allegations.<sup>370</sup> In an interview after the attacks, President Obama described the

<sup>367</sup> Mark Mazzetti, Robert F. Worth and Michael R. Gordon, “Obama’s Uncertain Path Amid Syria Bloodshed,” *The New York Times*, October 22, 2013, <http://mobile.nytimes.com/2013/10/23/world/middleeast/obamas-uncertain-path-amid-syria-bloodshed.html>.

<sup>368</sup> Ibid; See also Peter Baker, “Amid Hunger Strike, Senators Lead Delegation to Prison at Guantánamo,” *The Caucus* (New York Times blog), June 7, 2013, <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/06/07/amid-hunger-strike-senators-lead-delegation-to-prison-at-guantnamo/>.

<sup>369</sup> Martin Chulov, Mona Mahmood and Ian Sample, “Syria conflict: chemical weapons blamed as hundreds reported killed,” *The Guardian*, August 22, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/aug/21/syria-conflict-chemical-weapons-hundreds-killed>.

<sup>370</sup> “U.S. says unable to conclusively determine chemical weapons used in Syria,” *Reuters*, August 23, 2013, <http://in.reuters.com/article/2013/08/22/syria-crisis-usa-state-idINDEE97L0IA20130822>.

event as a “big event of grave concern.” However, President Obama also emphasized his cautiousness in deciding on a response to this episode. He explained, “Sometimes what we've seen is that folks will call for immediate action, jumping into stuff, that does not turn out well, gets us mired in very difficult situations, can result in us being drawn into very expensive, difficult, costly interventions that actually breed more resentment in the region.”<sup>371</sup> The statement clearly followed an already established pattern for the administration’s previous positions on military interventions. He expressed his caution and skepticism on the outcomes of the use of military force. For most Syrian observers, this statement itself was a major indicator of Washington’s reluctance to take action.<sup>372</sup>

Over the next few days, President Obama and his administration reviewed the situation in Syria. Following these deliberations, Secretary of State John Kerry made a statement confirming that the White House indeed held evidence on the use of chemical weapons in the suburbs of Damascus, including proof of the perpetrators. He stated,

What has already happened in Syria is grounded in facts, informed by conscience and guided by common sense. The reported number of victims, the reported symptoms of those who were killed or injured, the firsthand accounts from humanitarian organizations on the ground, like Doctors Without Borders and the Syria Human Rights Commission—these all strongly indicate that everything these images are already screaming at us is real, that chemical weapons were used in Syria.<sup>373</sup>

The administration believed that the attack had been conducted by the Assad regime, which it asserted possessed stockpiles of these weapons and had the ability to deliver such agents. Secretary Kerry also said that President Obama was working on making an informed decision on how to respond to these chemical attacks and that he believed that there must be

<sup>371</sup> “Obama: Syria chemical weapon claim a ‘grave concern,’” *BBC News*, August 23, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-23809409>.

<sup>372</sup> Anonymous interview by Kilic Kanat, July 2014

<sup>373</sup> “Transcript: Secretary of State John Kerry’s remarks on alleged Syria chemical attack,” *The Washington Post*, August 26, 2013, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/nation-security/transcript-secretary-of-state-john-kerrys-remarks-on-alleged-syria-chemical-attack/2013/08/26/40b0b4ea-0e8b-11e3-bdf6-e4fc677d94a1\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/nation-security/transcript-secretary-of-state-john-kerrys-remarks-on-alleged-syria-chemical-attack/2013/08/26/40b0b4ea-0e8b-11e3-bdf6-e4fc677d94a1_story.html).

accountability for those who perpetrated the attack.<sup>374</sup> At the same time, a debate was occurring within the administration on how to respond to the attacks—whether to strike the regime immediately or whether to wait for UN inspectors to release their report.<sup>375</sup> While the administration was buying time with these discussions, several reports emerged suggesting that a conversation between an official at the Syrian Ministry of Defense and a leader of a chemical weapons unit had been intercepted. The content of the leak confirmed that the Assad regime was responsible for the chemical attack in Ghouta.<sup>376</sup> This was a major development since both the administration and international community were waiting for proof to verify that the Syrian regime was behind the attacks before pursuing strong action. In the meantime, the U.S. military began devising potential scenarios to “punish the Syrian regime,” but the options were limited. The goal was to take punitive action against the perpetrators of this crime, without tipping the balance in favor of the Syrian opposition or overthrowing the Assad regime. In fact, the White House wanted to continue to avoid involvement in the Syrian conflict and limit its goals to retaliation for the breach of international norms. According to the plan, the U.S. and its allies would use Tomahawk missiles to destroy Syrian command and control facilities, weapons delivery systems, and intelligence bases to prevent the repetition of chemical attacks. The operation was planned to last for a narrow 48 hours, and be limited in nature with no boots on the ground or the imposition of a “no-fly zone.”<sup>377</sup> However, even before its announcement, debate began among security analysts about the effectiveness of such a plan. For instance, Chris Hammer, a former naval analyst who had earlier drafted a proposal for surgical strikes, expressed skepticism

<sup>374</sup> Ibid.

<sup>375</sup> Noah Shachtman, “Exclusive: Intercepted Calls Prove Syrian Army Used Nerve Gas, U.S. Spies Say,” *Foreign Policy*, August 27, 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/08/27/exclusive-intercepted-calls-prove-syrian-army-used-nerve-gas-u-s-spies-say/>.

<sup>376</sup> Ibid.

<sup>377</sup> Ibid.

about the success of such an operation under the current circumstances. According to him, this form of tactical action was successful only in the presence of a clear strategic objective. In the absence of a clear objective, such actions could prove pointless and counterproductive.<sup>378</sup> According to other security experts, the constant comments from the White House about the nature and length of the attacks were damaging to their purpose. For David Deptula, the comments were merely making it easier for Assad to prepare for the potential attacks, and thus minimizing their possible impact.<sup>379</sup> Moreover, foreign policy experts were critical of the way that President Obama was handling the decision making process. David Rothkopf, in an article in *Foreign Policy*, interpreted the Obama administration's constant reaffirmation of the limited nature of the operations as a message that said, "We don't care so much if you kill your people. We primarily care *how* you kill your people."<sup>380</sup>

With the release of the intelligence report, it was clear that the Obama administration held sufficient evidence that the Syrian regime was responsible for the chemical attacks.<sup>381</sup> Following the report's release, Secretary Kerry delivered a speech to the American public, explaining the major findings and how the U.S. would respond accordingly. Once again, Secretary Kerry claimed that there would be no boots on the ground and that the operation would be limited to airstrikes. He was careful to distinguish the intervention in Syria from previous U.S. military involvement in the

<sup>378</sup> John Hudson, "Architect of Syria War Plan Doubts Surgical Strikes Will Work," *The Cable* (Foreign Policy blog), August 26, 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/08/26/architect-of-syria-war-plan-doubts-surgical-strikes-will-work/>.

<sup>379</sup> Yochi Dreazen, "Did Obama Administration Leaks Already Spoil the Syria Attack?," *Foreign Policy*, August 28, 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/08/28/did-obama-administration-leaks-already-spoil-the-syria-attack/>.

<sup>380</sup> David Rothkopf, "Too Little, Too Late," *Foreign Policy*, August 27, 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/08/27/too-little-too-late/>.

<sup>381</sup> "Government Assessment of the Syrian Government's Use of Chemical Weapons on August 21, 2013," Press Release, August 30, 2012 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary),

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/08/30/government-assessment-syrian-government-s-use-chemical-weapons-august-21>.

region. In addition, Secretary Kerry argued that the cost of inaction outweighed cost of action. He stated,

As previous storms in history have gathered, when unspeakable crimes were within our power to stop them, we have been warned against the temptations of looking the other way. History is full of leaders who have warned against inaction, indifference, and especially against silence when it mattered most. Our choices then in history had great consequences and our choice today has great consequences.<sup>382</sup>

The wording of Secretary Kerry's statement was unusually strong. He called Assad a "thug and a murderer" and expressed that the international community had the responsibility to act when there was such an obvious breach of international norms and humanitarian principles. According to him, the decision of the international community would have deep significance. He said,

It matters because if we choose to live in a world where a thug and a murderer like Bashar al-Assad can gas thousands of his own people with impunity, even after the United States and our allies said no, and then the world does nothing about it, there will be no end to the test of our resolve and the dangers that will flow from those others who believe that they can do as they will.<sup>383</sup>

A day after Secretary Kerry's statement, President Obama made an announcement at the White House. Following several TV interviews with President Obama and the statements of Secretary Kerry, many around the world expected the President to explain the timing and nature of forthcoming limited airstrikes. Both the international community and U.S. public opinion awaited with curiosity the decision of the U.S. administration about its military intervention. Even before the speech began, it was heralded as a historic speech for the presidency. In his statement, President Obama claimed that he made the decision to take military action against regime targets. He also made it clear that it would not be an open-ended intervention and would not involve U.S. combat troops. He explained why it was important to degrade and destroy the regime's capacity to de-

<sup>382</sup> John Kerry, "Statement on Syria," Remarks, August 30, 2013 (online by U.S. Department of State),

<http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/08/213668.htm>.

<sup>383</sup> Ibid.

liver chemical weapons for the U.S. and the international community. The President's statement was regarded as a declaration of the administration's intent to engage in a military operation until President Obama surprised many with his footnote regarding the necessity to seek Congressional authorization to launch military strikes. He said, "Yet, while I believe I have the authority to carry out this military action without specific congressional authorization, I know that the country will be stronger if we take this course, and our actions will be even more effective."<sup>384</sup> In his *Atlantic* interview, Philip Gordon outlined, "The President made clear that the regime's use of chemical weapons in August 2013 was an example of what he meant when he warned against chemical weapon use."<sup>385</sup> He quoted the president as saying in his Rose Garden speech,

What's the purpose of the international system that we've built if a prohibition on the use of chemical weapons that has been agreed to by the governments of 98 percent of the world's people and approved overwhelmingly by the Congress of the United States is not enforced? Make no mistake—this has implications beyond chemical warfare. If we won't enforce accountability in the face of this heinous act, what does it say about our resolve to stand up to others who flout fundamental international rules?<sup>386</sup>

Later, David Rothkopf detailed how President Obama reached this decision. According to Rothkopf, it was again President Obama and his inner circle that made this critical decision without an interagency process or the involvement of key national security and foreign policy figures. Rothkopf stated that following the decision to launch a limited military strike,

...the president went on a walk around the South Lawn of the White House with his chief of staff, Denis McDonough, a longtime loyalist whose relationship with the president dates back to just prior to the 2008 campaign. McDonough was not just a chief of staff—he was a member of the president's tightly knit innermost circle and a former deputy national security advisor. McDonough had also long been one of the voices urging that America not get involved in Syria, often stiffening the commander in chief's resolve to keep out of the crisis when pressure came from others, such as first-term Secretary of

<sup>384</sup> Obama, "Statement by the President on Syria," August 31, 2013.

<sup>385</sup> <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/04/philip-gordon-barack-obama-doctrine/479031/>

<sup>386</sup> Goldberg, Jeffrey, "Obama's Former Middle East Adviser: We Should Have Bombed Assad."

State Hillary Clinton, who thought Washington ought to do more to support moderate opponents of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. It was during their 45-minute stroll that Obama shared with McDonough his concerns about following through on his Syria plan.

Afterward, when the two joined a small group of top advisors in the Oval Office, Obama reportedly announced, "I have a big idea I want to run by you guys," and then segued into his new plan to put action on hold until he could get a formal vote of congressional support. Many in the group were stunned by the news, including Rice, who reportedly argued that it would send a message of vacillation and would set a bad precedent of deferring to Congress on such issues.

Notably, the group did not include several key national security principals. Obama called Hagel to let him know about the decision to punt. Absent as well was Kerry, whom Obama later privately informed about his change of mind. The secretary of state's team felt he had been treated badly, having been asked to play the role of front man on this issue just hours before.<sup>387</sup>

The announcement arrived at a moment of significant political polarization in the United States. It also sparked a debate within the U.S. about executive authority and presidential power. Previous presidents, including George H. Bush, Bill Clinton, and Ronald Reagan had used limited force without seeking Congressional approval. President Obama, himself, had conducted a military operation in Libya without seeking approval from Congress and had previously not permitted considerable Congressional involvement in his drone strike campaign against terrorist targets in different countries around the world.<sup>388</sup> To seek an authorization before such a limited military strike set a precedent that could limit presidential powers in the future.<sup>389</sup> A few days after his statement, President Obama went on to say during an interview, "As commander-in-chief I always preserve the right and the responsibility to act on behalf of America's national se-

<sup>387</sup> David Rothkopf, "National Insecurity: Can Obama's Foreign Policy be Saved?" *Foreign Policy*, September 9, 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/09/09/national-insecurity/>.

<sup>388</sup> William G. Howell, "All Syria Policy is Local," *Foreign Policy*, September 3, 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/09/03/all-syria-policy-is-local/>.

<sup>389</sup> Karen DeYoung, "Obama's decision to turn to Congress on Syria decision triggers debate," *The Washington Post*, September 4, 2013, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obamas-decision-to-turn-to-congress-on-syria-decision-is-fodder-for-debate/2013/09/04/e59aace6-14ca-11e3-a100-66fa8fd9a50c\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obamas-decision-to-turn-to-congress-on-syria-decision-is-fodder-for-debate/2013/09/04/e59aace6-14ca-11e3-a100-66fa8fd9a50c_story.html).

curity...I do not believe that I was required to take this to Congress but I did not take this to Congress just because it's an empty exercise. I think it is important to have Congress's support."<sup>390</sup> As far as the international arena was concerned, the decision to seek approval from Congress was not interpreted as a constitutional step, but rather as an attempt to delay and potentially avoid conducting military strikes.

In the meantime, a series of meetings were held between the administration and Congress about the potential for the use of force in Syria. On September 3, President Obama met with Congressional leadership while Secretary Kerry, Secretary Hagel, and General Dempsey testified at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.<sup>391</sup> According to Hillary Clinton, during this process, she advised the president to secure symbolic support from Congress, while Russia and other countries—which were against a military intervention—watched warily to see what domestic political constraints would be placed on the administration.<sup>392</sup>

During the testimonies of Secretary Kerry and Secretary Hagel, members of the administration tried to make the case for a military operation. Secretary Hagel claimed, “A refusal to act would undermine the credibility of America’s other security commitments—including the President’s commitment to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. The word of the United States must mean something. It is vital currency in foreign relations and international and allied commitments.”<sup>393</sup> More significantly, confusion began to appear in later days about the nature of the

<sup>390</sup> Dan Roberts, “Obama seeks global backing on Syria: ‘I didn’t set a red line. The world did,’” *The Guardian*, September 4, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/04/obama-syria-red-line-chemical-weapons>.

<sup>391</sup> “Full Transcript: Kerry, Hagel and Dempsey testify at Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on Syria,” *The Washington Post*, September 3, 2013, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/running-transcript-senate-foreign-services-committee-hearing-on-syria/2013/09/03/35ae1048-14ca-11e3-b182-1b3bb2eb474c\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/running-transcript-senate-foreign-services-committee-hearing-on-syria/2013/09/03/35ae1048-14ca-11e3-b182-1b3bb2eb474c_story.html).

<sup>392</sup> Clinton, *Hard Choices*.

<sup>393</sup> Chuck Hagel, Statement on Syria before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Hearing, September 3, 2013, Available online at: <http://www.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1802>.

possible military operation and its targets. Although the administration was, until this declaration, very certain that it would be limited military strikes, both the President and some leaders of Congress began to signal the presence of a broader strategy that would include overthrowing the Assad regime. First of all, President Obama, addressing the Congressional leadership, accentuated that his strategy for confronting the chemical weapons issue should strengthen the opposition, leading to a peaceful transition and generating stability for Syria and the region. This was the first time that President Obama linked the planned military strikes to policy objectives.<sup>394</sup> Senator McCain, who had been a major proponent for more assertive action against the Assad regime, was clear about his reservations on the current plan. Senator McCain stated that President Obama, during his meeting with him, promised to include regime change as part of his strategy to on Syria's chemical weapons.<sup>395</sup>

It was a complicated scene for those who want to trace the process of decision making on Syria during this time. Part of the convolution owes to the President's indecisiveness, which created a great deal of confusion among both the bureaucracy and observers of U.S. policy on Syria. Despite the week of painstaking deliberation, policy preparation, and communication with allies leading to the decision to authorize the limited use of force, President Obama chose to invite Congress to vote on the strike. There were several reasons provided for this sudden change of heart. Firstly, the failure to reach an agreement at the UNSC and the vote in the British parliament contributed to this re-evaluation.<sup>396</sup> However, almost all accounts of this period indicate that President Obama wanted Congress to

<sup>394</sup> Dan Roberts and Spencer Ackerman, "Obama hints at larger strategy to topple Assad in effort to win over Republicans," *The Guardian*, September 3, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/03/obama-strategy-assad-republicans-syria>.

<sup>395</sup> Roberts, "Obama seeks global backing on Syria: 'I didn't set a red line. The world did.'"

<sup>396</sup> Dave Urbanski, "Obama Changed Mind at 11th Hour on Syria, Overriding Top National Security Advisers," *The Blaze*, August 31, 2013, <http://www.theblaze.com/stories/2013/08/31/obama-changed-mind-at-11th-hour-on-syria-overriding-top-national-security-advisers-officials-say/>.

take some responsibility in this critical decision so that if something went wrong, Congress could not criticize the President. Accordingly, following the disapproval of the administration's decision to use force in Libya from some members of Congress, the President decided to involve Congress in the decision making.<sup>397</sup> However, regardless of his motivation, the decision making process that President Obama conducted in this case demonstrates that he was making the decision himself and then consulting his aides on the operationalization of his unilateral plan.

In his public statements, the President claimed he altered the plan because a positive vote from Congress would strengthen the United States by offering Congress an olive branch and moving "forward together as one nation" on Syria.<sup>398</sup> Yet, some U.S. allies in the region as well as many members of the Syrian opposition saw the shift as an effort to backpedal on the plan, either to deflect blame in the event of failure or to use the polarized Congress to prevent its approval all together.<sup>399</sup> President Obama's backpedalling was also visible in his September 4th assertion that the U.S. "did not set a red line; the world set a red line."<sup>400</sup> With this statement, he was trying to argue that it was a global responsibility and thus it was not a burden for the United States to bear alone.

President Obama, caught in a policy nightmare on the plausibility of airstrikes, was relieved when Russian President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov offered him a peaceful egress from his dilemma. The conversion seemed sudden. In a September 9th press conference, Secretary Kerry declared that if Assad wanted to prevent the bombing, "he could turn over every single bit of his chemical weapons to the international community in the next week...[but] it can't be done." Discussions in Washington about the reasoning behind such a "proposal" spread among policy makers. For some within the State Department, it was a gaffe that Kerry made while

<sup>397</sup> Howell, "All Syria Policy is Local."

<sup>398</sup> Urbanski, "Obama Changed Mind at the 11th Hour."

<sup>399</sup> Interview. Kilic Kanat August 2014

<sup>400</sup> Roberts, "Obama seeks global backing on Syria: 'I didn't set a red line. The world did.'"

trying to make the case that Assad could do nothing to prevent these punitive airstrikes. In fact, even the State Department was caught unprepared to handle such an announcement. Immediately after the statement, the State Department spokeswoman, in an email statement, stated,

Secretary Kerry was making a rhetorical argument about the impossibility and unlikelihood of Assad turning over chemical weapons he has denied he used...His (Kerry's) point was that this brutal dictator with a history of playing fast and loose with the facts cannot be trusted to turn over chemical weapons, otherwise he would have done so long ago. That's why the world faces this moment.<sup>401</sup>

State Department officials were not informed about a change in plan. Following Secretary Kerry's statement, the predominant view was that the proposal would have no real impact on the Obama administration's plan.<sup>402</sup>

Yet, on September 10th, the Obama administration announced a deal with the Russians to do just that, a plan that had allegedly been in discussion for some time. Later in an interview President Obama mentioned some details about the process of reaching a deal on the chemical weapons. He had had conversations with Russian President Vladimir Putin about eliminating the Syrian regime's chemical weapon stockpiles in a summit. In his controversial interview with Jeffrey Goldberg, it was stated that

Amid the confusion, a *deus ex machina* appeared in the form of the Russian president, Vladimir Putin. At the G20 summit in St. Petersburg, which was held the week after the Syria reversal, Obama pulled Putin aside, he recalled to me, and told the Russian president "that if he forced Assad to get rid of the chemical weapons, that that would eliminate the need for us taking a military strike." Within weeks, Secretary Kerry, working with his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, would engineer the removal of most of Syria's chemical-weapons arsenal—a program whose existence Assad until then had refused to even acknowledge.<sup>403</sup>

While pursuing these conversations with different actors, President Obama requested that Congress delay the vote on striking Syria and wait

<sup>401</sup> "State Department: Kerry Statement On Syria Turning Over Chemical Weapons Simply Rhetorical," *The Huffington Post*, September 9, 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/09/state-department-kerry-syria\\_n\\_3893213.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/09/state-department-kerry-syria_n_3893213.html).

<sup>402</sup> Interview by Kilic Kanat, July 2014.

<sup>403</sup> <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>

to see if another round of diplomacy on Syria with Russia would work. Following this process, Russia proposed an agreement in which Syria would join the Chemical Weapons Convention and surrender its chemical arsenal to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) by mid-2014. The White House released a statement shortly after applauding the progress in negotiations on the elimination of chemical weapons.<sup>404</sup>

Following this agreement, Vice President Joe Biden labeled the agreement a credit to “President Barack Obama’s “absolutely clear” vision for foreign policy.”<sup>405</sup> Thus, the prospect of military intervention in Syria was essentially put to rest, as the United States joined forces with Russia in a UN draft resolution calling on Assad to relinquish his chemical weapons. Syria agreed to the deal, which the Obama administration identified as a direct result of the “credible threat of U.S. force.”<sup>406</sup> The deal received criticism from many who believed it lent Assad legitimacy and emboldened his actions. The debate on Syria had become diverted and monopolized by the issue of chemical weapons. As October came to an end, Secretary Kerry released a statement emphasizing the success of the first phase of the destruction of Syria’s chemical weapons.<sup>407</sup>

While the chemical weapons were being destroyed, the Assad regime continued its attacks on civilians with conventional weapons. The agreement had likely been perceived by the Assad regime as a green light to continue its operations using conventional weapons. In the meantime, after the President’s last minute change of heart, Secretary Kerry turned back to

<sup>404</sup> Barack Obama, “Statement by the President on U.S.-Russian Agreement on Framework for Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons,” Press Release, September 14, 2013, (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/14/statement-president-us-russian-agreement-framework-elimination-syrian-ch>.

<sup>405</sup> Alexander Burns, “Joe Biden credits Obama on Syria,” *Politico*, September 15, 2013, <http://www.politico.com/story/2013/09/joe-biden-syria-96825.html>.

<sup>406</sup> Dan Roberts and Julian Borger, “Vladimir Putin warns US not to launch attack in Syria,” *The Guardian*, September 12, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/12/putin-warns-us-not-to-attack-syria>.

<sup>407</sup> John Kerry, “Progress Eliminating Syria’s Chemical Weapons Program,” Press Release, October 31, 2013 (online by the U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/10/216143.htm>.

diplomacy. In October, he resumed preparations for an international conference that would bring together the regime and Assad forces for the first time. However, in the fall of 2013, Secretary Kerry's initiative had to be postponed because of the difficulty in bringing together separate groups, and more significantly, as many in the State Department believed that it could lead to a humiliating situation for the United States.<sup>408</sup> Furthermore, many actors in the region believed that it would be a futile endeavor that would not bring a solution to the conflict in Syria.

In the meantime, because of the fluid situation on the ground in Syria, there were several signs of change in U.S. policy in regards to the opposition forces. First, in November, seven different Islamic groups came together and formed the Islamic Front, which became a significant center of power on the ground. Although the U.S. did not consider the Islamic Front a terrorist organization like al-Nusra, the administration was concerned about the anti-American and anti-Western opinions and the Salafi backgrounds of some of the members. In just a short period of time, the Islamic Front gained control of several FSA bases. Following this development, State Department Spokeswoman Marie Harf responded by saying the U.S. was open to engagement with the Islamic Front. She mentioned that the U.S. "wouldn't rule out the possibility of meeting with the Islamic Front," and "can engage with the Islamic Front, of course, because they're not designated terrorists." Harf also said that the U.S. was open to meeting with different opposition groups.<sup>409</sup> In the meantime, *Reuters* reported that U.S. officials and Islamic Front leaders were scheduled to meet in Turkey at the same time as Ambassador Ford was expected to visit Turkey.<sup>410</sup> Ac-

<sup>408</sup> Yochi Dreazen, "Exclusive: Kerry and Top State Dept Officials Split Over Syria Talks," *The Cable* (Foreign Policy blog), October 23, 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/10/23/exclusive-kerry-and-top-state-dept-officials-split-over-syria-talks/>.

<sup>409</sup> John Hudson, "U.S. Weighing Closer Ties With Hard-Line Islamists in Syria," *The Cable* (Foreign Policy blog), December 17, 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/12/17/u-s-weighing-closer-ties-with-hardline-islamists-in-syria/>.

<sup>410</sup> Mariam Karouny and Dasha Afanasieva, "Syrian Islamist rebels to meet U.S. officials: opposition sources," *Reuters*, December 14, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/12/14/us-syria-crisis-rebels-idUSBRE9BD08D20131214>.

ording to some within the Syrian opposition, the main goal of the meeting was to bring together the Islamic Front and the FSA under a single command in order to create a unified command structure.<sup>411</sup> Although early contacts with the group proved inconclusive, it was nevertheless considered a major step in U.S. policy on Syria.<sup>412</sup>

In the beginning of 2014, U.S. diplomats sped up the preparation for the Geneva II Conference, which was expected to be the first step in launching a process of negotiation between the opposition and the Assad regime. During this time the growing crisis in Ukraine had become the biggest distraction for the State Department officials' efforts to organize the conference. The international conference took place in Switzerland in the last week of January. Securing the attendance of the Syrian opposition was a serious accomplishment on the part of Secretary Kerry.<sup>413</sup> Kerry, in his introductory remarks, underlined the significance of the negotiations to reach an agreement on a transition government. He stated,

Mutual consent, which is what has brought us here, for a transition government means that that government cannot be formed with someone that is objected to by one side or the other. That means that Bashar Assad will not be part of that transition government. There is no way – no way possible in the imagination – that the man who has led the brutal response to his own people could regain the legitimacy to govern. One man and those who have supported him can no longer hold an entire nation and a region hostage. The right to lead a country does not come from torture, nor barrel bombs, nor Scud missiles. It comes from the consent of the people. And it's hard to imagine how that consent could be forthcoming at this point in time.

So just as there could be no place for the perpetrator of this violence, there could also be no place for the thousands of violent extremists who spread their hateful ideology and worsen the suffering of the Syrian people. And as we hear talk about terrorism today, make no mistake: It is the presence of the current intransigence within the existing government that makes this problem worse.

<sup>411</sup> Hudson, "U.S. Weighing Closer Ties With Hard-Line Islamists in Syria."

<sup>412</sup> Scott Lucas, "Syria: US Shifts Position — Again — on Co-operation with Islamic Front," *EA WorldView*, December 13, 2013, <http://eaworldview.com/2013/12/syria-us-shifts-position-co-operation-islamic-front/>.

<sup>413</sup> Joyce Karam, "Syria's Geneva II is a win for Kerry with 'zero chance' for transition," *Al-Arabiya*, January 23, 2014, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/analysis/2014/01/23/Syria-s-Geneva-II-is-a-win-for-Kerry-with-zero-chance-for-transition.html>.

That is creating a magnet for terrorists. And until a transition takes place, there is no prayer of reducing the increase of terrorism.<sup>414</sup>

Despite recognizing Secretary Kerry's efforts to bring together this conference, most people did not expect the conference to result in any agreement or the formation of a transition government. As expected, after a week, the conference ended with no significant outcome.

With the failure of the Geneva II process, the administration shelved the discourse about finding a diplomatic solution to the crisis in Syria for a period of time. Administration officials still underlined that there could be no military solution for the conflict in Syria; however, those who recently left the administration, such as Fred Hof who had served as special advisor for the transition in Syria, demonstrated that there were some serious disagreements within the Obama administration on this issue. After leaving his post, Hof criticized the administration for constantly emphasizing that there could be no military solution. Immediately after the end of Geneva II meetings, he stated,

Those who say there is no military solution for Syria are really saying there are no military options they wish to exercise. Even the modest, life-saving option of destroying regime air, artillery, rocket, and missile assets used to produce genocidal effects is dismissed on the grounds that it cannot solve the overall problem of Syria. As President Obama recently claimed in *The New Yorker*, the choice is all or nothing: invade and occupy Iraq-style or refrain entirely from military strikes. Why is this so? What was he considering last August before he changed his mind? Did the anti-genocide bombing campaign in Serbia a decade-and-a-half ago aim to occupy the country?<sup>415</sup>

According to media reports, during this period, Secretary Kerry had begun to express his frustration more vocally during meetings. Leaks from a closed-door meeting at the security conference in Munich between Secretary Kerry and senior Senators strengthened this perception.

<sup>414</sup> "Transcript: John Kerry's remarks at Geneva II conference on Syria on Jan. 22," *The Washington Post*, January 22, 2014, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/transcript-john-kerrys-remarks-at-geneva-ii-conference-on-syria-on-jan-22/2014/01/22/f2ec3a56-83b8-11e3-bbe5-6a2a3141e3a9\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/transcript-john-kerrys-remarks-at-geneva-ii-conference-on-syria-on-jan-22/2014/01/22/f2ec3a56-83b8-11e3-bbe5-6a2a3141e3a9_story.html).

<sup>415</sup> Frederic C. Hof, "Syria: What Next for Geneva II?" *MENASource* (Atlantic Council blog), February 3, 2014, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/syria-what-next-for-geneva-ii>.

According to reports, Secretary Kerry was frustrated with the lack of success of the current policy on Syria and expressed concerns regarding the increasing number of extremists streaming into the region. Those present at the meeting, including Senator Graham and Senator McCain, stated that Secretary Kerry emphasized the need for a new strategy and the necessity of boosting the capacity of the opposition.<sup>416</sup> Although it was immediately denied by the State Department, most pundits in Washington, D.C. believed that there was indeed a need for a new strategy. They agreed that President Obama's approach of reaching out to Russia and finding a diplomatic solution had proven to be ineffective in degrading or stopping Assad's forces.

From February onwards, the use of military strikes to weaken the Syrian regime and training opposition forces was back on the table. The main sponsor of this renewed effort was Secretary Kerry. Partly out of the failure of the Geneva II process and partly as a result of the delays in the elimination of chemical weapons, Secretary Kerry consulted with Generals David Petraeus and Jack Keane. The generals stated that limited military strikes together with the training and equipping of the opposition forces would be a good way to go for changing the situation on the ground in Syria. According to a *Wall Street Journal* report, Kerry proposed this idea to the White House. His main ally in this endeavor was U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Samantha Power, who was well known for her role in Libya and her advocacy of humanitarian interventionism. Referring to a senior administration official, *The Wall Street Journal* reported, "Kerry has felt that diplomacy backed by the threat of force is an effective approach and that it would strengthen the administration's hand, but he has never felt that we have run out of diplomatic options—this will

<sup>416</sup> Michael R. Gordon and Mark Mazzetti, "U.S. Spy Chief Says Assad Has Strengthened His Hold on Power," *The New York Times*, February 4, 2014,

[http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/05/world/middleeast/us-representative-to-syrian-opposition-is-retiring.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/05/world/middleeast/us-representative-to-syrian-opposition-is-retiring.html?_r=0).

only be resolved through diplomacy."<sup>417</sup> However, during the meeting on Secretary Kerry's proposition, Secretary Hagel and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Martin Dempsey opposed the plan and convinced Secretary Kerry to postpone it. For General Dempsey, even a very limited military intervention in the Syrian conflict could possibly suck the U.S. into a prolonged struggle whereas, for Secretary Hagel, the real problem was how to vet the opposition forces to train. Furthermore, Pentagon officials were also concerned about the train and equip program for the Syrian opposition, since such an endeavor could jeopardize the process of eliminating Syria's chemical weapons.<sup>418</sup> This situation demonstrated, unlike the case of Clinton's plan to arm opposition groups, that there was a serious difference of opinion between the Pentagon and the State Department over the best policy for Syria.

Although President Obama's position during this debate has not been made public, there have been important indications of his stance. In interviews with David Remnick, President Obama expressed his opposition to both military intervention and arming and equipping the moderate rebels. He considered U.S. action in Syria as a gateway for a disaster similar to that of Iraq. In the interview, he said, "I am not haunted by my decision not to engage in another Middle Eastern war. It is very difficult to imagine a scenario in which our involvement in Syria would have led to a better outcome, short of us being willing to undertake an effort in size and scope similar to what we did in Iraq."<sup>419</sup> President Obama also responded to criticism over not helping the Syrian opposition by stating, "When I hear people suggesting that somehow if we had just financed and armed the opposition earlier, that somehow Assad would be gone by now and we'd have a peaceful tran-

<sup>417</sup> Adam Entous and Julian E. Barnes, "John Kerry, U.S. Military Clash on Approach to Syria's Rebels," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 7, 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304441304579479500649988892>.

<sup>418</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>419</sup> David Remnick, "Going the Distance," *The New Yorker*, January 27, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/27/going-the-distance-2?currentPage=all>.

sition, it's magical thinking."<sup>420</sup> With these statements, the President closed the door to different forms of interventions offered by different administration officials. Former Ambassador Fred Hof, in an essay discussing the interview, wrote that President Obama was not willing to even evaluate any other options and equated every form of military intervention with the Iraqi experience. Because of this, the only alternative for him seemed inaction.<sup>421</sup> In the same essay, Hof described President Obama's arguments against arming the opposition, "This is a straw man fallacy that misrepresents the views of those who have opposed the arm's-length, rhetoric-rich hope that Syria could somehow fix itself if only the warring parties would meet and sort things out. The real question is what the balance on the ground would look like now in Syria if the president had heeded the advice of his national security team in the summer of 2012," he wrote.<sup>422</sup> However, the arguments that President Obama made during the interview made it clear that he had not changed his position on Syria.

During the first months of 2014, Syria had a strong place on the administration's agenda because of increasing reports of radicalism in the region. As stated above, Secretary Kerry emphasized during the Geneva Conference that the region was becoming "a magnet for terrorists" because of the policies of the Syrian government. This statement was later repeated by the Director of National Intelligence, James Clapper, in a Senate Intelligence Committee hearing. Director Clapper stated that Syria had become a huge magnet for terrorists for both recruitment and training.<sup>423</sup> A few weeks after President Obama's interview, the Director of CIA, John Brennan, issued a statement that conflicted with what the President had previously put forward. During a hearing, Director Brennan went on to

<sup>420</sup> Ibid.

<sup>421</sup> Frederic C. Hof, "Syria: The Shadow of Iraq," *MENASource* (Atlantic Council blog), January 27, 2014, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/syria-the-shadow-of-iraq>.

<sup>422</sup> Ibid.

<sup>423</sup> John Hudson, "Intel Chiefs: Syria a 'Huge Magnet' for International Terrorists," *The Cable* (Foreign Policy blog), January 29, 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/01/29/intel-chiefs-syria-a-huge-magnet-for-international-terrorists/>.

state that the situation in Syria had created a fertile ground for organizations such as al-Qaeda to emerge and organize attacks in and alongside the Syrian border.<sup>424</sup> Following this, Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson stressed that the civil war in Syria had become a threat for the U.S. homeland security.<sup>425</sup> However, especially in terms of rising threats like ISIS, President Obama was less inclined to consider them a major potential threat. Responding to a question in regards to ISIS, the President said,

The analogy we use around here sometimes, and I think is accurate, is if a jayvee team puts on Lakers uniforms that doesn't make them Kobe Bryant....I think there is a distinction between the capacity and reach of a bin Laden and a network that is actively planning major terrorist plots against the homeland versus jihadists who are engaged in various local power struggles and disputes, often sectarian.<sup>426</sup>

Following this he also emphasized,

Let's just keep in mind, Falluja is a profoundly conservative Sunni city in a country that, independent of anything we do, is deeply divided along sectarian lines. And how we think about terrorism has to be defined and specific enough that it doesn't lead us to think that any horrible actions that take place around the world that are motivated in part by an extremist Islamic ideology are a direct threat to us or something that we have to wade into.<sup>427</sup>

Both of these statements later generated a great deal of criticism of President Obama and the administration's approach to the early signals of ISIS' presence in Iraq and Syria. The statements also demonstrated that there was mismatch between the intelligence community and the White House about the threat the organization posed.

Just before the summer, media reports provided details about the delivery of U.S. anti tank missiles to opposition groups. According to these reports, two dozens U.S.A.-made TOW missiles were provided to moderate

<sup>424</sup> Michael R. Gordon and Mark Mazzetti, "U.S. Spy Chief Says Assad Has Strengthened His Hold on Power," *The New York Times*, February 4, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/05/world/middleeast/us-representative-to-syrian-opposition-is-retiring.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/05/world/middleeast/us-representative-to-syrian-opposition-is-retiring.html?_r=0).

<sup>425</sup> "Homeland security secretary: Syria conflict a threat to U.S.," *CBS News*, February 7, 2014, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/homeland-security-secretary-syria-conflict-a-threat-to-united-states/>.

<sup>426</sup> Remnick, "Going the Distance."

<sup>427</sup> Ibid.

opposition groups by the Friends of Syria. This was part of the pilot program, observed as the introduction of a potentially larger flow of sophisticated weaponry in the very near future. The TOWs that were given to opposition groups in early March had extra security mechanisms, including fingerprint-keyed security devices. The only statement from the White House on the issue maintained, “The U.S. is committed to building the capacity of the moderate opposition, including through the provision of assistance to the vetted members of the moderate armed opposition.”<sup>428</sup> The observers of U.S. policy on Syria, including Andrew Tabler and Fred Hof, interpreted this recent development as a signal of a major change in U.S. policy in the region, particularly its relations with armed opposition groups.<sup>429</sup> However, in the coming weeks and months, there were no additional reports about the continuation of this effort. It was instead a one-time deal. Later, some members of the Syrian opposition stated that those who delivered the missiles asked the opposition members to record and post their use of these missiles on social media. It was not very clear why this was demanded from the armed opposition but it was interpreted as more of a PR move than a change in strategic thinking.<sup>430</sup> A few weeks later, a statement by General Martin Dempsey demonstrated that there was no major change in the approach to the Syrian opposition. In a panel at the Atlantic Council, General Dempsey responded to a question about the Syrian opposition’s demands for anti-aircraft weaponry. He stated that such assistance would be a short-term solution for the problem on the ground and described the future of Syria as a series of crises and conflicts.<sup>431</sup> Later, Presidential Advisor

<sup>428</sup> Ellen Knickmeyer, Maria Abi-Habib And Adam Entous, “Advanced U.S. Weapons Flow to Syrian Rebels,” *The Wall Street Journal*, April 18, 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304626304579509401865454762>.

<sup>429</sup> Matthew Bell, “Why are US-made anti-tank missiles showing up in Syria?,” *PRI*, April 17, 2014, <http://www.pri.org/stories/2014-04-17/why-are-us-made-anti-tank-missiles-showing-syria>.

<sup>430</sup> Anonymous, interview by Kilic Kanat, July 2014.

<sup>431</sup> John Hudson, “Top U.S. General: Syrian Opposition Not Ready for the Big Leagues,” *The Cable* (Foreign Policy blog), May 14, 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/05/14/top-u-s-general-syrian-opposition-not-ready-for-the-big-leagues/>.

Ben Rhodes would defend the administration's failure to take this opportunity to build a serious opposition force, saying that the the notion that there would a simple way to build an army out of an opposition quickly has been overstated. "The notion that we are going to be able to make contact with people that we are just beginning to get to know and be able to build them into an army in a period of months is not realistic," he would say.<sup>432</sup>

In the summer of 2014, the Obama administration tried to pass a resolution at the UNSC to authorize an International Criminal Court investigation into the Syrian regime on the grounds of its crimes and the evidence about mass atrocities committed by Assad's forces. However, the resolution was vetoed by Russia and China. After the vote failed, Ambassador Samantha Power made a statement expressing her disappointment with the outcome and the commitment of the U.S. to help those being persecuted by the regime.<sup>433</sup> There was also increasing signs of frustration within the administration. During a May visit by the Syrian opposition to Washington—of which the content was leaked to the press a few days later—Secretary Kerry reiterated his frustration about the Syrian impasse, revealing yet another major disagreement within the administration. Reportedly, in a private meeting with the leaders of the Syrian opposition, Secretary Kerry disclosed that he believed the international community wasted a year by failing to coordinate in a concerted effort to topple Assad.<sup>434</sup> What is particularly important was that while the administration was signaling a potential reevaluation of its Syria policy, senior members of the administration seemed to be extremely frustrated with the lack of developments. Some members of the opposition, who were present in the

<sup>432</sup> Ben Rhodes, interview by Mehdi Hasan, *al Jazeera Up Front*, September 25, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/upfront/2015/09/obama-failed-syria-150925142816322.html>.

<sup>433</sup> Samantha Powers, "Explanation of Vote by Ambassador Samantha Power, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, On the Security Council Vote on Syria," Press Release, May 22, 2014 (online by the United States Mission to the United Nations), <http://usun.state.gov/briefing/statements/226438.htm>.

<sup>434</sup> Josh Rogin, "Exclusive: Kerry Told Syrian Rebels 'We Wasted a Year' in Fight Against Assad," *The Daily Beast*, May 12, 2014, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/05/12/exclusive-kerry-told-syrian-rebels-we-wasted-a-year-in-fight-against-assad.html>.

meeting, stated that Secretary Kerry was vocal in his frustration; however, they also said that Secretary Kerry was ultimately not the decision-maker and that the power to act did not lay in his hands.<sup>435</sup>

In May, President Obama delivered a speech at West Point, in which he focused on foreign policy and security challenges that the U.S. was facing in the world. President Obama, after restating his belief that there was no military solution to the conflict, signaled again a potential policy change by saying that he was planning to help those who could be an alternative to both terrorists and a brutal dictator at the same time. He said,

As frustrating as it is, there are no easy answers – no military solution that can eliminate the terrible suffering anytime soon. As President, I made a decision that we should not put American troops into the middle of this increasingly sectarian civil war, and I believe that is the right decision. But that does not mean we shouldn't help the Syrian people stand up against a dictator who bombs and starves his people. And in helping those who fight for the right of all Syrians to choose their own future, we also push back against the growing number of extremists who find safe-haven in the chaos.

With the additional resources I'm announcing today, we will step up our efforts to support Syria's neighbors – Jordan and Lebanon; Turkey and Iraq – as they host refugees, and confront terrorists working across Syrian borders. I will work with Congress to ramp up support for those in the Syrian opposition who offer the best alternative to terrorists and a brutal dictator.<sup>436</sup>

Again, although it was not completely clear how this policy change would be operationalized in the coming months, this statement was considered as a signal that a serious shift in U.S. policy was on the horizon.<sup>437</sup> While these considerations were underway, Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq, was taken over by ISIS, shocking the administration and the international community. Although some considered this development a source of distraction for the Obama administration, observers like Hof—

<sup>435</sup> Interview by Kilic Kanat, January 2015

<sup>436</sup> Abby Ohlheiser, "President Obama Says His Foreign Policy Critics Are 'Misreading History,'" *The Wire*, May 28, 2014, <http://www.thewire.com/politics/2014/05/watch-live-president-obama-addresses-his-foreign-policy-critics/371700/>.

<sup>437</sup> Michael Gerson, "Michael Gerson: The end of illusions," *The Washington Post*, June 12, 2014, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/michael-gerson-the-end-of-illusions/2014/06/12/0ff2bf24-f25b-11e3-914c-1fdb0614e2d4\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/michael-gerson-the-end-of-illusions/2014/06/12/0ff2bf24-f25b-11e3-914c-1fdb0614e2d4_story.html).

writing about developments in Syria—argued that it could be a great opportunity for revising the Syria policy and working with the FSA to change the course of the conflict in the country and resist the rise of ISIS and the Assad regime at the same time.<sup>438</sup> While President Obama signaled his change of course, at the same time, he continued to express his skepticism about the capability of the moderate opposition groups in Syria. Answering a question on this issue, President Obama stated,

Oftentimes, the challenge is if you have former farmers or teachers or pharmacists who now are taking up opposition against a battle-hardened regime, with support from external actors that have a lot at stake, how quickly can you get them trained; how effective are you able to mobilize them. And that continues to be a challenge.<sup>439</sup>

This was the second time that the President portrayed the moderate Syrian opposition in these terms. He mostly used this argument to explain his reluctance to engage in train and equip operations. For him, it was unrealistic to expect these forces to make a difference on the ground even if they were being supported and equipped by the United States. This constant emphasis on the opposition's incapability was harshly criticized by former members of the administration. For instance, in an essay criticized this position, Hof stated,

The question that arises, however, is why President Obama fails to mention the tens of thousands of Syrian Army officers and soldiers who abandoned the Assad regime rather than participate in that regime's campaign of mass homicide. Why is the totality of what the president calls "the moderate opposition" characterized by him as entirely civilian, and therefore inadequate, in nature? And why does he not assume that a healthy percentage of the farmers, teachers, pharmacists, dentists, and radio reporters to whom he refers have had significant prior military training as conscripts in Syria? Does he think that Syria has had an all-volunteer military force for the past fifty years?

The president and his strategic communications people should drop this alibi. It is inaccurate, unworthy, and patronizing, if not insulting. Yes, Syrians

<sup>438</sup> Frederic C. Hof, "Syria: The Impact of ISIS in Iraq," *MENASource* (Foreign Policy blog), June 13, 2014, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/syria-the-impact-of-isis-in-iraq>.

<sup>439</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President on the Situation in Iraq," Press Release, June 19, 2014 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/06/19/remarks-president-situation-iraq>.

from all walks of life have rebelled against a regime that exploits their labor, assaults their dignity, and assigns to their lives and well-being a sub-human status. Among those who have taken up arms there are, no doubt, some who have had to learn for the first time about the business end of an AK-47. And even those in uniform who walked away from the Assad killing machine were not the recipients of world-class military training. Yet to imply that Syrians who have taken up arms to defend themselves are coming directly from the stable or the library to the battlefield is inaccurate. It is also gratuitously damaging to President Obama in the eyes of Syrians. One wonders, however, if he cares.<sup>440</sup>

There were other voices that raised similar concerns about President Obama's handling of the Syria crisis and the potential impact on the situation on the ground if President Obama would arm and equip the moderate rebels. While trying to respond to these claims, President Obama constantly re-emphasized that the moderate opposition was nothing but a "bunch of ordinary civilians" who had no experience or training in fighting against Syria's battle-hardened military. In an interview in late June, President Obama stated, "When you get farmers, dentists, and folks who have never fought before going up against a ruthless opposition in Assad, the notion that they were in a position to suddenly overturn not only Assad but also ruthless, highly trained jihadists if we just sent a few arms is a fantasy."<sup>441</sup>

On June 26, 2014, the President asked Congress for an unexpected \$500 million to train and arm the moderate opposition in Syria. This was yet another significant development in his Syria strategy. The plan was an important turning point in terms of signaling yet another change in the policy of the administration. According to media reports, the program would be affiliated with the Defense Department instead of CIA.<sup>442</sup>

<sup>440</sup> Frederic C. Hof, "Syria: Farmers, Teachers, Pharmacists, and Dentists," *MENASource* (Foreign Policy blog), June 20, 2014, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/syria-farmers-teachers-pharmacists-and-dentists>.

<sup>441</sup> "Obama: Notion that Syrian opposition could have overthrown Assad with U.S. arms a 'fantasy,'" *CBS News*, June 20, 2014, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/obama-notion-that-syrian-opposition-could-overthrow-assad-a-fantasy/>.

<sup>442</sup> Julian E. Barnes, Adam Entous and Carol Lee, "U.S. Set To Train, Arm Syria Rebels," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 27, 2014, <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB20001424052702304557404579648751596692202>.

However, observers of the Syria policy were extremely cautious in evaluating such a move without seeing its full implementation by the Pentagon. According to one Democratic senator, the White House had only sent emails, not envoys, to Congress in order to court their favor for the proposal.<sup>443</sup> Moreover, there had been little movement from the administration to fund any programs to address the problem. Until August 2014, U.S. policy had not been enough to change the tide of the conflict, but whatever moderate effort the United States made could be considered a small step in the right direction.

<sup>443</sup> Interview by Kilic Kanat, July 2014.



## SEVEN

### FIGHTING AGAINST ISIS (AUGUST 2014 - AUGUST 2015)

■ ■ When people harm Americans,  
anywhere, we do what's necessary  
to see that justice is done.

*President Obama, August 20, 2014*



“ISIL is as sophisticated and well-funded as any group that we have seen. They’re beyond just a terrorist group. They marry ideology, a sophistication of strategic and tactical military prowess. They are tremendously well-funded. Oh, this is beyond anything that we’ve seen. So we must prepare for every- thing. And the only way you do that is that you take a cold, steely, hard look at it and -- and -- and get ready.”

*Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, August 21, 2014*

The fall of Mosul to ISIS in June 2014 led to an extremely serious turning point in the Obama administration’s policy on Syria. The fact that U.S. had not foreseen the fall of Mosul created major doubt in the U.S. about the capabilities of its intelligence agencies. It seems that ISIS’s capabilities and the resulting rapid gains that they made were underestimated by the administration.<sup>444</sup> President Obama’s earlier statement that ISIS was merely a “jayvee team” was frequently used as fodder for criticisms of the Obama administration’s failure to take precautions to prevent the rise of such a group. The fall of Mosul was the critical development that kicked off this reexamination of U.S. intelligence and of the administration’s policy toward the group. Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq, was taken during the relatively smooth invasion by ISIS. The ease of the annexation raised concerns about the power and effectiveness of the organization. With Mosul, ISIS received new access to resources that

<sup>444</sup> Gorman, Siobhan & Julian E. Barnes, “U.S. Underestimated Urgency of Islamic State Threat in Iraq,” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 10, 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-spies-missed-urgency-of-islamic-state-threat-in-iraq-1407717475>.

significantly increased the capacity of the organization to serve as a major player in the conflict in Iraq, as well as expand into Syria.

The meteoric rise of attention on ISIS was directly responsible for the change in President Obama's calculus on Iraq and Syria. Immediately after the fall of Mosul, President Obama went to Congress to request \$500 million for a program to train and equip moderate Syrian rebels to combat ISIS territorial advances and stem the contagion of the Syrian conflict into Iraq. The request was the cause of much deliberation in Washington, since it was largely undetermined exactly how these funds would be utilized. Some even considered this as a public relations campaign by the Obama administration to avert criticisms about the administration's failure to properly address the rise of ISIS.<sup>445</sup> The request coincided with two days of high level meetings between Secretary of State John Kerry and president of the Syrian Opposition Coalition President Ahmad al-Jarba in Saudi Arabia. Coupled together, the meetings and request signaled that the Obama administration had decided to focus on arming opposition groups as the key component of what amounted to a substantial expansion of U.S. involvement in Syria.<sup>446</sup>

The new campaign of U.S. military action in the region kicked off in August 2014. At the request of the Iraqi government, President Obama authorized airstrikes against ISIS targets advancing toward the northern Iraqi city of Erbil. In his statement announcing the new strategy, President Obama stated:

First, I said in June -- as the terrorist group ISIL began an advance across Iraq -- that the United States would be prepared to take targeted military action in Iraq if and when we determined that the situation required it. In recent days, these terrorists have continued to move across Iraq, and have neared the city of Erbil, where American diplomats and civilians serve at our consulate and American military personnel advise Iraqi forces.

<sup>445</sup> Anonymous interview. Kilic Kanat September 2014.

<sup>446</sup> John Kerry, "Remarks With Syrian Opposition Coalition President Ahmad al-Jarba During Their Meeting," Remarks, June 27, 2014 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/06/228534.htm>.

To stop the advance on Erbil, I've directed our military to take targeted strikes against ISIL terrorist convoys should they move toward the city. We intend to stay vigilant, and take action if these terrorist forces threaten our personnel or facilities anywhere in Iraq, including our consulate in Erbil and our embassy in Baghdad. We're also providing urgent assistance to Iraqi government and Kurdish forces so they can more effectively wage the fight against ISIL.

Second, at the request of the Iraqi government -- we've begun operations to help save Iraqi civilians stranded on the mountain. As ISIL has marched across Iraq, it has waged a ruthless campaign against innocent Iraqis. And these terrorists have been especially barbaric towards religious minorities, including Christian and Yazidis, a small and ancient religious sect. Countless Iraqis have been displaced. And chilling reports describe ISIL militants rounding up families, conducting mass executions, and enslaving Yazidi women.<sup>447</sup>

This marked the first time that the U.S. returned to battle in Iraq since the withdrawal of troops in 2011.

By mid-August, the seriousness of the ISIS threat was beginning to be taken more seriously by the Obama administration officials. In a Press conference with Gen. Dempsey, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel stated that ISIS was not an ordinary terrorist organization and that ordinary counter-terrorism strategies may be insufficient to eliminate this threat. He said:

ISIL is as sophisticated and well-funded as any group that we have seen. They're beyond just a terrorist group. They marry ideology, a sophistication of strategic and tactical military prowess. They are tremendously well-funded. Oh, this is beyond anything that we've seen. So we must prepare for everything. And the only way you do that is that you take a cold, steely, hard look at it and-- and -- and get ready.<sup>448</sup>

Although the rise and rapid spread of ISIS was a major shock for the Obama administration, and undoubtedly shaped its new strategy, it was not the only shock the region had in store for the White House. A second major shock came when two American hostages were beheaded by the ISIS. On August 20th, news broke that the American freelance war correspondent James Foley, who had been captured in northern Syria in late

<sup>447</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/07/statement-president>

<sup>448</sup> <http://www.defense.gov/News/News-Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/606917>

2012, had been beheaded by the terrorist group. The White House's first reaction came through the National Security Council Spokesperson Caitlin Hayden. "The intelligence community is working as quickly as possible to determine its authenticity. If genuine, we are appalled by the brutal murder of an innocent American journalist and we express our deepest condolences to his family and friends. We will provide more information when it is available," Hayden said.<sup>449</sup> Soon after this initial statement, President Obama delivered an address about the incident:

"When people harm Americans, anywhere, we do what's necessary to see that justice is done... And we will continue to confront this hateful terrorism, and replace it with a sense of hope and civility. And that's what Jim Foley stood for, a man who lived his work; who courageously told the stories of his fellow human beings; who was liked and loved by friends and family," the President told the American public.<sup>450</sup>

The video of Foley's beheading was distributed by ISIS through social media, and shocked the American public. In a very short period of time it became the most impactful terrorist attack for American public opinion since September 11. Before the shock of the Foley attack had abated, just two weeks after Foley's execution, ISIS militants violently beheaded a second freelance journalist, Steven Sotloff. This execution was also captured on videotape by ISIS militants and subsequently distributed to global broadcast media outlets. President Obama issued another statement following this second execution. He made it clear that he was repulsed by the attack, before making a grand commitment to destroy ISIS altogether. "Our objective is clear, and that is: degrade and destroy ISIL so that it's no longer a threat, not just to Iraq but also to the region and to the United States," he put forward before continuing, "it's not only that we're going to be bringing to justice those who perpetrated this terrible crime against these two fine young men....The

<sup>449</sup> Carter, Chelsea J., "Video shows ISIS beheading U.S. journalist James Foley," *CNN*, August 20, 2014, <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/08/19/world/meast/isis-james-foley/>.

<sup>450</sup> Barack Obama, "Statement on the Murder of James Foley," August 20, 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/photos-and-video/video/2014/08/20/president-obama-delivers-statement-murder-james-foley#transcript>.

United States will continue to lead a regional and international effort against the kind of barbaric and ultimately empty vision.”<sup>451</sup>

The two executions, occurring in such a short period of time, led to an increase in pressure for the Obama administration to act more forcefully against ISIS. According to a statement given by a masked militant in the Sotloff video, the execution was conducted as a retaliation for the administration's recent decision to conduct strikes in northern Iraq. On the same day as the footage emerged, the White House announced that the Department of Defense would honor a State Department request for an additional 350 military personnel to be transferred to Baghdad to “protect [U.S.] diplomatic facilities and personnel.”

On September 4th, President Obama and UK Prime Minister David Cameron published a joint op-ed in the *Times* of London. The piece called upon NATO leaders to become a “more effective security network that fosters stability around the world.” In this piece, Syria was only mentioned as a possible source of insecurity to the Western world. There was nothing particular how to approach or resolve the problem in Syria. Instead, it stated:

Developments in other parts of the world, particularly in Iraq and Syria threaten our security at home. And NATO is not just an alliance of friends who come to the aid of each other in times of need, it is also an alliance based on national self-interest. Whether it is regional aggression going unchecked or the prospect that foreign fighters could return from Iraq and Syria to pose a threat in our countries, the problems we face today threaten the security of British and American people, and the wider world.<sup>452</sup>

A day later, Secretary of State John Kerry and Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel held a joint meeting in Wales with European allies to discuss the ISIS threat. Specifically, the meeting focused on how NATO members could contribute to an anti-ISIS mission in Iraq, with mention

<sup>451</sup> Davis, Julie Hirschfeld, “After Beheading of Steven Sotloff, Obama Pledges to Punish ISIS,” *The New York Times*, September 3, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/04/world/middleeast/steven-sotloff-isis-execution.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/04/world/middleeast/steven-sotloff-isis-execution.html?_r=1).

<sup>452</sup> Obama, Barack & David Cameron, “Strengthening the NATO Alliance,” *Times*, (accessed [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk)), September 4, 2014, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/strengthening-the-nato-alliance-article-by-david-cameron-and-barack-obama>.

of creating a program to train and equip Iraqi security forces at federal, regional, and provincial levels.

Shortly after these joint discussions with the U.S. transatlantic partner, President Obama delivered a nationally televised speech outlining the country's first public strategy for defeating ISIS.<sup>453</sup> In an address only a few days after a statement by President Obama enumerated the four main objectives of the new strategy against ISIS. They included:

- 1) A systematic campaign of airstrikes against "these terrorists"
- 2) Increasing support for forces fighting ISIL on the ground
- 3) Continuing to draw on the "substantial counterterrorism capabilities" to prevent ISIL attacks
- 4) Providing humanitarian assistance to civilians displaced by ISIL attacks.<sup>454</sup>

The strategy demonstrated that the Obama administration had totally shifted its regional focus toward fighting against ISIS, rather than the underlying issues leading to the group's rise in the country. The fact that the operation would center on counterterrorism was only further emphasized in Obama's future statements rolling out the strategy. The aforementioned train and equip program, it was determined, would mostly aim at the anti-ISIS strategy. An integral piece of this would center on working with Syria's neighbors, particularly Turkey, to stem the flow of foreign fighters into and out of Syria.

The strategy was first teased out to the press in a background press conference call between senior administration officials and members of the press. In this call, administration officials vaguely mentioned the Assad regime and the situation in Syria. They note that:

<sup>453</sup> Obama, Barak, "Statement by the President on ISIL," *Office of the White House Press Secretary*, September 10, 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/statement-president-isil-1>.

<sup>454</sup> Obama, Barack, "Statement by the President on ISIL," *Office of the White House Press Secretary*, September 10, 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/statement-president-isil-1>.

President Obama has made very clear that he will not tolerate safe havens for terrorist organizations that threaten the United States. He will not tolerate a safe haven for ISIL in Syria...We are also calling on Congress to authorize and resource a train-and-equip mission for the Syrian opposition. We had been providing military assistance to the Syrian opposition, but clearly we need to expand our efforts because the Syrian opposition is the counterweight to both ISIL and to the Assad regime. We are not going to work with the Assad regime in going after ISIL because they have no legitimacy in the Sunni communities...on the question about aiding the Syrian moderate opposition in Syria to go after ISIL, the issue here is -- unlike in Iraq, where we have a government with whom we can work and a ground force that we can support and assist, we do not have a government, quite obviously, in Syria with whom we can work. We need to bolster the Syrian moderate opposition to enable it to be able to take and hold ground, pushing out both ISIL and the Assad regime.<sup>455</sup>

This statement ultimately raised further questions as to the main goal of the Obama administration's strategy about Syria in post-ISIS period.

In the days following the speech, there was a new appointment at the State Department. General John Allen joined the agency as the Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL. In the meantime Secretary of State John Kerry was deployed to try and rally Middle Eastern and European partners to commit the strategy announced by President Obama. Secretary Kerry first traveled to Turkey to meet with President Erdogan and Prime Minister Davutoglu to discuss both the rising humanitarian crisis as refugees from Syria poured in unprecedented numbers across Turkey's southern borders and the fight against the ISIS. He conducted similar visits to Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq in a push to align Arab nations with the coalition. Following these visits, Saudi Arabia pledged to host training facilities for Syrian rebels, but it, along with the other targeted nations, failed to publicly outline what military support it might actually provide to a coalition. The lack of clarity about the role of potential allies was downplayed by the President, who instead focused on Saudi Arabia's commitment to hosting and helping to train rebel fighters. It was a frequently observed problem

<sup>455</sup> "Background Conference Call on the President's Address to the Nation," Press Release, September 10, 2014 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/background-conference-call-presidents-address-nation>.

during the tenure of the Obama administration that the nature of relations with allies were poorly clarified.

Shortly after the President's strategy speech, Congress moved to back a resolution to provide \$500 million to train and equip "appropriately vetted elements of the Syrian opposition and other appropriately vetted Syrian groups." Following the vote, President Obama made another public statement in an effort to clarify the details of the program, designed to train and equip moderate opposition forces. In this statement, President Obama said:

Today's vote is another step closer to having the authorization to train & equip vetted elements of the moderate Syrian opposition so they can defend themselves against, and ultimately push back on, ISIL forces in Syria, while creating the conditions for the political solution necessary to solve Syria's crisis once and for all. This training program will be conducted outside of Syria, in partnership with regional countries. There will be no U.S. military personnel in Syria as part of this program.<sup>456</sup>

The Secretary of Defense and Secretary of State also made statements about the Congressional approval and underlined their appreciation for the swift action by the lawmakers.<sup>457</sup> Despite bipartisan support for the program, key players on both sides of the aisle had lingering hesitations about the plan. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, who later lent his support to the bill, told the press, "even though I support what the president's doing, I'd like to take another look at it a couple of months from now and see how it's working out." In a similar train of thought, Democrat Senator Ben Cardin said of the train and equip program, "the concern is, where does it lead?"

<sup>456</sup> Barack Obama, "Statement by the President on the House of Representatives Vote to Authorize the Title X Train and Equip Program for the Moderate Syrian Opposition," Statement, September 17, 2014 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/17/statement-president-house-representatives-vote-authorize-title-x-train-a>.

<sup>457</sup> Chuck Hagel, "Statement by Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel on Congressional Passage of the Continuing Resolution," News Release, September 18, 2014 (online by U.S. Department of Defense), <http://www.defense.gov/News/News-Releases/News-Release-View/Article/605193/statement-by-secretary-of-defense-chuck-hagel-on-congressional-passage-of-the-c>.

On September 22, 2014, the U.S. in partnership with Bahrain and the UAE began to launch its first airstrikes against ISIS forces in Syria. A day later, President Obama announced from the South Lawn of the White House that American forces had, indeed, begun a campaign to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIS.<sup>458</sup> To supplement the now very obvious U.S. investment to fight against the ISIS, President Obama, just two days following the commencement of airstrikes, chaired a UN Security Council Forum on Foreign Terrorist Fighters. The summit resulted in UNSC Resolution 2178, a resolution creating a new political and legal framework requiring countries to address the threat of foreign fighters transiting through borders.<sup>459</sup> Following this resolution, President Obama addressed the UN General Assembly on ISIS and Syria, to say:

Together with our partners, America is training and equipping the Syrian opposition to be a counterweight to the terrorists of ISIL and the brutality of the Assad regime. But the only lasting solution to Syria's civil war is political -- an inclusive political transition that responds to the legitimate aspirations of all Syrian citizens, regardless of ethnicity, regardless of creed. I can promise you America will remain engaged in the region, and we are prepared to engage in that effort.<sup>460</sup>

Secretary Kerry later reiterated this sentiment at UN headquarters:

Let me make it clear to all those who are part of that effort that for all of the men and women who make up the moderate Syrian opposition, we stand behind you today. We have stood behind you in these last years. I know sometimes there's been a greater desire for more, but we will continue to stand beside you as long as ISIL remains a threat and Assad remains in power, as well.<sup>461</sup>

<sup>458</sup> Barack Obama, "Statement by the President on Airstrikes in Syria," Statement, September 23, 2014 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/23/statement-president-airstrikes-syria>.

<sup>459</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President at U.N. Security Council Summit on Foreign Terrorist Fighters," Remarks, September 24, 2014 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/24/remarks-president-un-security-council-summit-foreign-terrorist-fighters>.

<sup>460</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks by President Obama in Address to the United Nations General Assembly," Remarks, September 24, 2014 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/24/remarks-president-obama-address-united-nations-general-assembly>.

<sup>461</sup> John Kerry, "Remarks at Syria Ministerial," Remarks, September 24, 2014 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/09/232086.htm>.

In both of these statements the White House was looking to respond to the criticisms in regards to the U.S. position about Syria. A few days later Secretary Hagel again reiterated that the U.S. would not coordinate the fight against ISIS with the Assad regime.<sup>462</sup>

The first challenge to the new policy/strategy took place within a month of its declaration. Between September 18th and 22nd ISIS forces advanced across the northern Syrian countryside, surrounded, and began a siege on the predominantly Kurdish city of Kobani. The siege sparked a wave of 180,000 to flee across Syria's southern border into Turkey. This was the largest refugee outflux since the beginning of the conflict in 2011.

The Pentagon responded to the ISIS offensive with modest strikes around Kobani in an effort to convey its commitment to the defense of the area to its Arab coalition partners. However, these airstrikes were insufficient to appropriately deal with the advance. Various officials from the White House, State Department, and Pentagon warned the administrations that the current level of airstrikes deployed would be insufficient to protect Kobani. Wary still of over-committing the U.S. to playing an integral role in Syria, the administration chose to pressure Turkey to take stronger action in assisting Kobani, rather than increasing its own support. Statements by senior U.S. officials appeared in both the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* expressing the administration's frustration over Turkey's "inaction" in Kobani. In the *Washington Post*, one of the administrative official stated, "There's no question the U.S. government thinks Turkey can do more, should do more, and that they are using excuses not to do more... We have been sending that message very clearly behind the scenes."<sup>463</sup>

<sup>462</sup> Chuck Hagel, "Department of Defense Press Briefing by Secretary Hagel and Gen. Dempsey in the Pentagon Briefing Room," News Transcript, September 26, 2014 (online by U.S. Department of Defense), <http://www.defense.gov/News/News-Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/606934/department-of-defense-press-briefing-by-secretary-hagel-and-gen-dempsey-in-the>.

<sup>463</sup> Mohammed, Arshad, "U.S. frustrated by Turkish inaction, but seeks support over time," *Reuters*, October 8, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-usa-turkey-idUSKCN0HX21020141008>.

During this period the administration was unwavering in its pressure for Turkey to become a key piece of the anti-ISIS coalition. White House Spokesperson Jen Psaki called Turkey “well positioned to contribute to the broad-based coalition,”<sup>464</sup> specifically citing that its military and political cooperation were uniquely placed to stop ISIS financing, counter the flow of foreign fighters into the region, provide humanitarian assistance to those worse affected, and ultimately delegitimize the extremist ideology ISIS conveys. President Obama’s recently appointed Special Envoy General John Allen and his deputy Brett McGurk were dispatched to Ankara for meetings with Turkish officials, including PM Davutoglu, to try and convince Turkey to join the coalition and allow the U.S. access to Incirlik air base. The U.S. needed Incirlik for a new starting point for increasing strikes against ISIS in Syria. A joint military planning team followed up this visit for military-to-military consultations about a pending agreement. In the meantime, President Obama’s Deputy National Security Adviser Ben Rhodes, in an interview, stated that U.S. forces air-dropped arms and medical equipment to the people in Kobani, which demonstrated a new opening in U.S. policy towards the conflict in Syria<sup>465</sup>. The ISIS crisis had already transformed the U.S. policy towards Syria and shifted the attention from the crisis in Syria to the counter-terrorism against the ISIS.

As the conflict drew into November of 2014, the fate of the Assad regime was discussed less and less. The administration’s attention and primary target completely shifted to ISIS and its activities. Although the administration kept emphasizing that the regime in Syria was not a legitimate government or representative of the Syrian people, the intensity of this criticism declined dramatically. In the meantime, the military focus of the anti-ISIS fight also shifted from Syria to Iraq. At the end of the first week of November, President Obama authorized the deployment of 1,500

<sup>464</sup> Psaki, Jen, “Daily Press Briefing,” *U.S. Department of State*, October 9, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2014/10/232808.htm>.

<sup>465</sup> Wolf Blitzer interview with Ben Rhodes, “The Situation Room”, aired October 20, 2014, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1410/20/sitroom.01.html>.

additional troops to Iraq, doubling the number of Americans deployed to train and advise Kurdish and Iraqi forces.<sup>466</sup> However while the U.S. administration increased the number of troops in Iraq, some members of the administration kept trying to recall attention to the situation in Syria. For instance, in a testimony before the U.S. Congress, Secretary Hagel stated that, though ISIS has been degraded in some parts of Iraq, it would not be defeated only through the use of force. He also emphasized that the lack of a partner government in Syria for the U.S. to work with meant that more time, patience, and perseverance would be required before the military strategy in place begins to deliver tangible results.<sup>467</sup>

The Obama administration kicked off the new year in 2015 with the announcement that it would begin providing direct military assistance to Syrian opposition forces. According to reports, the U.S. would train and equip “moderate” Syrian opposition forces and the program would train and support an estimated 5,000 recruits in the first year.<sup>468</sup> The training would be conducted by 400 soldiers and hundreds of U.S. support personnel in Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia.<sup>469</sup> The announcement followed meetings between senior U.S. officials and Syrian opposition leaders in Istanbul. It was considered a major game changer by many analysts and observers of the Syrian war. Days later, during his State of the Union Address, President Obama underscored the train and equip program. He asked the congress to pass a resolution authorizing the use of force against ISIS, saying:

In Iraq and Syria, American leadership -- including our military power -- is stopping ISIL's advance. Instead of getting dragged into another ground war in the Middle East, we are leading a broad coalition, including Arab nations,

<sup>466</sup> Helene Cooper and Michael D. Shear, “Obama to send 1,500 More Troops to Assist Iraq,” *The New York Times*, November 7, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/08/world/middleeast/us-to-send-1500-more-troops-to-iraq.html>.

<sup>467</sup> Jake Richmond, “Hagel: ISIL Degraded But Remains Dangerous,” *DoD News*, November 13, 2014, <http://www.defense.gov/News-Article-View/Article/603644/hagel-isil-degraded-but-remains-dangerous>.

<sup>468</sup> Payne, Ed, “Pentagon: U.S. to begin to train and equip moderate Syria rebels,” *CNN*, January 16, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/01/16/us/syria-rebel-training/>.

<sup>469</sup> Steward, Phil & Tom Perry, “Pentagon to deploy 400 troops to train Syrian rebels,” *Reuters*, January 19, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-usa-idUSKBN0KP0FO20150116>.

to degrade and ultimately destroy this terrorist group. We're also supporting a moderate opposition in Syria that can help us in this effort, and assisting people everywhere who stand up to the bankrupt ideology of violent extremism. Now, this effort will take time. It will require focus. But we will succeed. And tonight, I call on this Congress to show the world that we are united in this mission by passing a resolution to authorize the use of force against ISIL. We need that authority.<sup>470</sup>

The development of train and equip was perceived as the emergence of a dual-track policies for Syria. On the one hand, during a series of summits the international coalition was trying to come up with policies that aims to defeat ISIS and on the other hand the development of the train-equip program related more directly to the broader dimensions of the civil war. Coalition airstrikes were also providing vital support for Kurdish forces working to liberate the fallen city of Kobani. The success of these forces in liberating the city was one of a string of defeats suffered by ISIS at the hands of Kurdish forces in northeastern Syria. However, the burgeoning U.S.-PYD relationship would, in its later phases, seriously impact Washington's relationship with its regional allies and particularly with Turkey.

Both the domestic and international audience was expecting a new strategy on Syria; the Obama administration released its 2015 National Security Strategy plan in February. In the document the double track strategy of the US administration was one again reiterated. The plan focused on the double approach of destroying ISIS utilizing the strategy that was released in September and developing the train and equip program in an effort to further militarily support the moderate Syrian opposition. The document stated:

We [the U.S.] have undertaken a comprehensive effort to degrade and ultimately defeat ISIL. We will continue to support Iraq as it seeks to free itself from sectarian conflict and the scourge of extremists. Our support is tied to the government's willingness to govern effectively and inclusively and to ensure ISIL cannot sustain a safe haven on Iraqi territory. This requires professional and accountable Iraqi Security Forces that can overcome sectarian divides and protect all Iraqi citizens. It also requires international support, which is why we are leading an unprecedented international coalition to work with the Iraqi

<sup>470</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President in State of the Union Address," *Office of the White House Press Secretary*, January 20, 2015 <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/20/remarks-president-state-union-address-january-20-2015>.

government and strengthen its military to regain sovereignty. Joined by our allies and partners, including multiple countries in the region, we employed our unique military capabilities to arrest ISIL's advance and to degrade their capabilities in both Iraq and Syria. At the same time, we are working with our partners to train and equip a moderate Syrian opposition to provide a counterweight to the terrorists and the brutality of the Assad regime."<sup>471</sup>

However the text also stated that the only solution for the conflict would be a political one.<sup>472</sup>

Of course, despite the National Security Strategy Plan's attempt to balance between the fight against ISIS and to deal with the brutality of the Assad regime, ISIS continued to be the priority. A centerpiece of this goal was securing Congressional authorization to use force against ISIL. A draft resolution submitted to Congress sought to provide flexibility for "limited circumstances, such as rescue operations involving U.S. or coalition personnel or the use of special operations forces to take military action against ISIL leadership."<sup>473</sup> The resolution, however, did not receive any love from Congress.<sup>474</sup>

The month of February brought new leadership in the Obama administration. Secretary Hagel, who had become openly his disagreeable about the President's Syria policy had been forced out by the administration in November. Secretary Hagel made several comments both before he was moved out of the office and immediately after his departure criticizing the Obama administration's handling of the Syrian conflict and the fight against ISIS. In one of his remarks, he said "Strategically, there are limits to

<sup>471</sup> White House, "National Security Strategy," February 2015, [https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015\\_national\\_security\\_strategy.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy.pdf).

<sup>472</sup> Ibid.

<sup>473</sup> Obama, Barack, "Remarks by the President on Request to Congress for authorization of Force Against ISIL," *Office of the White House Press Secretary*, February 11, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/11/remarks-president-request-congress-authorization-force-against-isil>.

<sup>474</sup> Berman, Russel, "The War Against ISIS Will Go Undeclared," *The Atlantic*, April 15, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/04/the-war-against-isis-will-go-undeclared/390618/>.

how much you can accomplish with airstrikes.”<sup>475</sup> In the meantime, as later revealed, there were serious disagreements between the Secretary of Defense and the Obama administration’s White House staff. In his first interview following his resignation, Secretary Hagel argued that the administration tried to micromanage defense policies through the advisors of President Obama and accused the administration of having no strategy to fix the conflict in Syria.<sup>476</sup> The quarrels between him and other administration officials at the White House were a constant theme of the Obama White House. The first three Secretaries of Defense of the Obama administration wrote or said very similar things about the way that President Obama handled security policies in their memoirs and interviews. This Hagel interview demonstrates that, as late as December 2014, the administration was still in disarray about how to deal with the conflict in Syria. The author outlined his interpretation on Hagel’s comments in the interview, saying:

Hagel, however, said there was too much time spent on “nit-picky, small things in the weeds,” while larger questions were ignored. “We seemed to veer away from the big issues. What was our political strategy on Syria?” While Hagel agreed with Obama’s reluctance to deploy a large ground force to Syria or Iraq, he wanted the administration to hammer out a plan for a diplomatic settlement in Syria and to clarify whether Assad needed to go and under what circumstances, he said.<sup>477</sup>

Secretary Hagel was replaced by Ashton B. Carter, who had been the principal architect of the administration’s drone policy. Carter’s appointment elicited analysts’ skepticism as to whether he would be more capable of impacting White House decision making than his predecessors, especially in a waning presidential tenure.<sup>478</sup> Secretary Carter’s first

<sup>475</sup> Baron, Kevin, “Airstrikes Not Enough to Defeat ISIL, Hagel Says,” *Defense One*, August 21, 2014, <http://www.defenseone.com/threats/2014/08/airstrikes-not-enough-defeat-isil-hagel-says/92153/>.

<sup>476</sup> De Luce, Dan, “Hagel: The White House Tried to ‘Destroy’ Me,” *Foreign Policy*, December 18, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/12/18/hagel-the-white-house-tried-to-destroy-me/>.

<sup>477</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>478</sup> Harper, Jon, “Ashton Carter sworn in as new secretary of defense,” *Stars and Stripes*, February 17, 2015, <http://www.stripes.com/news/us/ashton-carter-sworn-in-as-new-secretary-of-defense-1.330008>.

move in office was to gather his high ranking military commanders and diplomats in Kuwait for a comprehensive review of the administration's strategy in the Middle East. Following a six-hour strategy session, the new Secretary said that he was "satisfied" with the current campaign, whilst acknowledging the complexity of the situation in Iraq and Syria against ISIS. "I think that we have clearly in focus the idea that this can't be a purely American thing, that it truly is a coalition effort and needs to be a coalition effort to succeed. I think it was clear to us that we can't neatly partition it geographically, that it has global evocations," he said.<sup>479</sup> This statement was a direct contradiction with the statements of the former Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel and his overt dissatisfaction with the current strategy to defeat ISIS.

The Obama administration continued to underscore what it perceived to be advancements by the coalition against ISIS throughout the end of February. Special Envoy Allen testified before the Senate Foreign Relations committee that the coalition had succeeded in the initial phase of its campaign on ISIS. The strategic, operational, and tactical movements of the organization in Iraq had been stunted.

Through over 2,500 coordinated Coalition airstrikes in support of our partners on the ground, we have degraded ISIL's leadership, logistical, and operational capabilities, and are denying sanctuary in Iraq from which it can plan and execute attacks... Since our first airstrikes in August, ISIL's advance has been blunted and they have been driven back from the approaches to Baghdad and Erbil... the aura of the so called Caliphate is destroyed, and the future of the so-called Caliph, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, is very much in doubt,<sup>480</sup> Allen said during his testimony.

Meanwhile, at the UN, Ambassador Power was fighting for the humanitarian side of events in Syria, particularly internally displaced persons,

<sup>479</sup> Whitlock, Craig, "Pentagon chief says he is satisfied by U.S. campaign against Islamic State," *The Washington Post*, February 23, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/pentagon-chief-says-he-is-satisfied-by-us-campaign-against-islamic-state/2015/02/23/50f8ebd4-b9f1-11e4-bc30-a4e75503948a\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/pentagon-chief-says-he-is-satisfied-by-us-campaign-against-islamic-state/2015/02/23/50f8ebd4-b9f1-11e4-bc30-a4e75503948a_story.html).

<sup>480</sup> Allen, John, "Opening Statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee," *U.S. Senate Records*, February 25, 2015, [http://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Gen\\_Allen\\_Testimony.pdf](http://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Gen_Allen_Testimony.pdf).

and for the Obama administration's insistence on finding a political solution to the conflict.

There is only one way out of this horrific crisis, and that is through a comprehensive political solution. To that end, the U.S. again joins others in commending the efforts of the UN Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura to halt - even for a limited time - the use of all aerial bombs and heavy artillery in Aleppo, whose civilians have suffered immensely amidst fierce fighting," she said to a UNSC session on the humanitarian situation in Syria held in late February.<sup>481</sup>

In early spring, despite the grumblings from the Congress, the U.S. continued its plan to degrade and destroy ISIS. In early March, there were debates about an extensive offensive plan to retake Mosul from ISIS forces.<sup>482</sup> In a briefing to reporters, CENTCOM officials even detailed the size and composition of the force necessary for such an action.<sup>483</sup> Accordingly, the plan was set include the training of 20,000 to 25,000 Iraqi and Kurdish troops in order to launch a ground offensive against the ISIS. However that plan never materialized.

On the Syrian front, Special Envoy Allen was routinely critical about the lack of a partner on the ground in Syria. However, he remained optimistic about the future of the train and equip program. In an address at the Atlantic Council he stated that U.S. forces were "working closely with regional partners to establish sites for training and equipping vetted, to moderate Syrian opposition elements, to train approximately 5,000 troops per year for the next 3 years."<sup>484</sup> However, some government and independent reports began to unearth that the program was not functioning as smoothly or as effectively as Special Envoy Allen was claiming.. For instance, in a letter to the Sen. John McCain, the Senate Armed Services

<sup>481</sup> Power, Samantha, "Remarks at a Security Council Session on the Humanitarian Situation in Syria," *United States Mission to the United Nations*, February 26, 2015, <http://usun.state.gov/remarks/6382>.

<sup>482</sup> Baron, Kevin, "U.S. Military Reveals Massive Plan to Attack, Retake Mosul from Islamic State," *DefenseOne*, February 19, 2015, <http://www.defenseone.com/threats/2015/02/us-military-reveals-massive-plan-attack-retake-mosul-islamic-state/105669/?oref=d-river>.

<sup>483</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>484</sup> John Allen, "Remarks at the Atlantic Council," Remarks, March 2, 2015 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/s/seci/238108.htm>.

Committee chairman, the State Department wrote: “Even when considered as a whole, U.S. government assistance to the moderate armed opposition will not be decisive in defeating regime forces.... Nor will the fighters who receive this assistance, on their own, force Assad to change his calculus about trying to hold on to power.”<sup>485</sup> A Reuters report in April also showed that, despite the 11 month duration of the mission, the program had not yet gotten “off the launch pad.”<sup>486</sup> These skepticisms about to train and equip program increased gradually through the summer 2015. In May, Secretary Carter and General Dempsey held a press conference to address the train and equip program. They announced that program had been inaugurated with a class of 90 rebels, and that the trainees would be operational in a matter of months. Secretary Carter stated:

There are about 90 of the trainees in this company-sized tranche, first tranche that I referred to.... First of all, these are highly vetted individuals. That's an important part of the program. Second, the training takes place in a secure location. And third, of course, our people who are participating in the training are very experienced in this kind of training, including in security procedures.

However, there were significant problems emerging within the program. First, it was reported that the initial group of Syrian rebels receiving CIA assistance in 2014 collapsed as Jabhat al-Nusra, a terrorist group affiliated with al-Qaeda, captured their headquarters. Via social media, Jabhat al-Nusra boasted that American-supplied TOW missiles were amongst the stockpile of weapons captured from Hasm,<sup>487</sup> a nightmare scenario for an administration wary of intervening in the conflict. The blow would foreshadow the Pentagon's next effort to train and equip moderate rebel fighters in Syria. Training for the Syria program was

<sup>485</sup> Afanasieva, Dahsha, Warren Strobel, & Phil Stewart, “Set to begin, U.S. plan for Syrian rebels already mired in doubt,” *Reuters*, April 27, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-usa-insight-idUSKBN0NI0BZ20150427>.

<sup>486</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>487</sup> Sherlock, Ruth, “Syrian rebels armed and trained by U.S. surrender to al-Qaeda,” *The Telegraph*, November 2, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/11203825/Syrian-rebels-armed-and-trained-by-US-surrender-to-al-Qaeda.html>.

scheduled to begin within four to six weeks; 100 Syrians were alleged to have been vetted for the program.<sup>488</sup>

One of the most important allies for the U.S. train and equip program was Turkey. In late March, President Obama and Turkish President Erdogan discussed the program by phone, reviewing the program for vetted members of the moderate Syrian opposition.<sup>489</sup> Turkish officials announced that the fighters would be trained at a military base in Turkey by a joint Turkish-U.S. team. Additional training centers had also been envisioned by the U.S. in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Qatar.<sup>490</sup> The agreement moved forward despite the continuation of different policies by the Turkish and American governments. Unlike the Obama administration, Turkey, was focusing on the train and equip forces as an effort to bolster the Syrian opposition against the Syrian regime. Inversely, the U.S.'s main strategic goal continued to be degrading ISIS capabilities. Disagreements also occurred as to whether or not a no-fly zone should be established in northern Syria to support future training of opposition forces and to provide relief to refugees and internally displaced persons. In April, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu traveled to Washington to meet with Secretary Kerry for further discussions on the mission and the coalition's continued efforts to stem the flow of foreign fighters into Syria and Iraq. However, the two NATO allies failed to reach an agreement on this issue.

A lingering question for the administration centered on whether or not, and to what extent, the U.S. would be willing to militarily back up train and equip forces once they were in the field. By this point, the government was conducting almost daily air strikes against ISIS targets in

<sup>488</sup> Sly, Liz, "Syrian rebel group that got U.S. aid dissolves," *The Washington Post*, March 1, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/syrian-fighter-group-that-got-us-missiles-dissolves-after-major-defeat/2015/03/01/286fa934-c048-11e4-a188-8e4971d37a8d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/syrian-fighter-group-that-got-us-missiles-dissolves-after-major-defeat/2015/03/01/286fa934-c048-11e4-a188-8e4971d37a8d_story.html).

<sup>489</sup> Office of the White House Press Secretary, "Readout of the President's Call with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey," March 26, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/03/26/readout-president-s-call-president-recep-tayyip-erdogan-turkey>.

<sup>490</sup> Bekdil, Burak Ege, "Turkey, U.S. Set Plan to Train Syrian Rebels," *DefenseNews*, March 31, 2015, <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/policy-budget/warfare/2015/03/31/turkey-syria-rebels-isis-joint-train-border-no-fly/70740010/>.

both Iraq and Syria, but the issue of backing opposition forces trained under the train and equip program was by no means guaranteed. Though initially scheduled to start on May 9th, the initial matriculation of the program was postponed for “technical reasons” according to Turkish Foreign Minister Cavusoglu. However, many believed that the main reason for the delay of the program were reported disagreements between Turkey and the U.S. about the overall mission of the program.

While the U.S. and Turkey were negotiating the details of the train and equip program, the White House was also participating in negotiations with Russia on how to address the Syrian conflict. As part of this process, on May 12th, Secretary Kerry traveled to Sochi to meet with Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov; the visit marked the first time since 2013 that Kerry had made the long trip to Russia. The visit came during the final weeks of negotiations on the Iran nuclear agreement but Syria was also a topic of discussion.

As the one year anniversary of U.S. airstrikes in Syria approached, President Obama made a statement expressing caution about the trajectory of the airstrikes. He admitted at the G-7 Summit that the U.S. strategy toward Iraq, Syria, and ISIS was not comprehensive, and stated during a press conference:

We don't have, yet, a complete strategy, because it requires commitments on the part of Iraqis as well,” he continued, “The details are not worked out. We are still seeing thousands of foreign fighters flowing into, first, Syria, and then, oftentimes, ultimately into Iraq. And not all of that is preventable, but a lot of it is preventable -- if we've got better cooperation, better coordination, better intelligence, if we are monitoring what's happening at the Turkish-Syria border more effectively.”<sup>491</sup>

In an interview a few weeks later, Special Envoy Allen tried to clarify the U.S. strategy to defeat ISIS as well as lingering questions about the administration's broader Syria goals. When he was asked whether the fight against ISIS subsumed U.S. focus on Assad regime, he answered:

<sup>491</sup> Obama, Barak, “Remarks by President Obama in Press Conference after G7 Summit,” *Office of the White House Press Secretary*, June 8, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/06/08/remarks-president-obama-press-conference-after-g7-summit>.

Oh no, not at all. Things are not trending in his favor currently. Six months ago, he was in a different position than he is today, which I believe is a position of some instability, but weaker in his position as a leader. The United States and the Coalition partners are still strongly focused on a political process that removes Bashar al-Assad from the leadership of Syria and places it in the hands of the Syrian people.<sup>492</sup>

In the summer of 2015, the highly touted “train and equip” program again came under the spotlight following the Pentagon’s acknowledgement in a CNN report that the program has “run into a number of difficulties,” including struggles to identify qualified fighters from Syria to join the program, as well as maneuvering the complexities of vetting possible candidates for the program. Of the 6000 program volunteers, less than 200 had begun training with the program. Considering the initial goal of training 3000 fighters during 2015, the numbers demonstrated that the program was way behind the schedule.<sup>493</sup> Secretary Carter acknowledged that there had been significant challenges for the program during subsequent testimony before Congress. He said that only 60 fighters were actively involved in the program. He admitted that the number was lower than expected. The low number was attributed to the high vetting standards required for participation in the program. Secretary Carter also mentioned that program continued to serve as a necessary program to achieve the U.S. goal of eradicating ISIS.<sup>494</sup> Train and equip forces, branded as the “New Syrian force” by the military, finally entered Syria through the Jordanian border on July 12, 2015. The mission was immediately thrown off course when fighters came under attack by al-Nusra; several other fighters were captured just days before. Later attacks on a second

<sup>492</sup> John Allen, “Interview With Judy Woodruff, PBS NewsHour,” Interview, June 16, 2015 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/s/seci/246718.htm>.

<sup>493</sup> Starr, Barbara, “Snag in Pentagon training of Syrian rebels to fight ISIS,” *CNN*, June 18, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/06/18/politics/syrian-rebels-pentagon-training-isis/>.

<sup>494</sup> Pellerin, Cheryl, “Carter: DoD, Global Coalition Seeks ISIL’s Lasting Defeat,” *DOD News, Defense Media Activity*, July 7, 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/News-Article-View/Article/612612/carter-dod-global-coalition-seek-isils-lasting-defeat>.

entry wave ended up handing over 25 percent of their weapons to al-Nusra, rendering the initial launch an abject failure.<sup>495</sup>

While the immediate failure of train and equip was a blow to the U.S., it was not the only iron the administration had in the fire. The U.S. had also begun to step up its military support for YPG forces in Syria. The U.S. military had built up, over time, surveillance and drone operations with the tactical mission of helping Kurdish militias; special force officers also began to step up intelligence sharing. To the Obama administration, Kurdish forces represented a glimmer of hope in the ongoing battle against ISIS, having already retaken the Syrian Kurdish city of Kobani from ISIS forces and more recently pushed ISIS from the border town of Tal Abyad. However, the fact that YPG was a faction of the PKK, which is recognized as a terrorist organization by U.S., EU and Turkey, put the U.S. administration in a challenging situation with Turkey.

In the summer of 2015, the fight against ISIS was still the most significant topic on the U.S. agenda. However, the nuclear deal with Iran had shifted the focus and the nature of the debates in the country. There were rumors of a secret deal between U.S. and Iran about policies on Syria and other countries of the region. Skepticism was also increasing about U.S. commitment to the security in the Middle East. These perceptions spurred the administration to redouble efforts emphasizing the complexity of the situation in Syria as well as ongoing U.S. commitment to fight against the ISIS. During a Press conference discussing the Iran deal, President Obama spoke about the U.S.'s policy on ISIS. He said:

My key goal when I turn over the keys to the President -- the next President -- is that we are on track to defeat ISIL; that they are much more contained and we're moving in the right direction there. That we have jump started a process to resolve the civil war in Syria, which is like an open sore in the region and is giving refuge to terrorist organizations who are taking advantage of that chaos." The President continued to discuss the importance of the Coalition and U.S. allies in finding a solution in regards to the conflict in Syria," be-

<sup>495</sup> Torbati, Yeganeh, "U.S.-trained Syrian rebels gave equipment to Nusra: U.S. military," *Reuters*, September 24, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-usa-equipment-idUSKCN0RP2HO20150925>.

fore continuing, “We’re not going to solve the problems in Syria unless there’s buy-in from the Russians, the Iranians, the Turks, our Gulf partners. It’s too chaotic. There are too many factions. There’s too much money and too many arms flooding into the zone. It’s gotten caught up in both sectarian conflict and geopolitical jockeying. And in order for us to resolve it, there’s going to have to be agreement among the major powers that are interested in Syria that this is not going to be won on the battlefield.”<sup>496</sup>

Through the summer of 2015, a key piece of U.S. attention in the region was negotiations with Turkey on the potential anti-ISIL coalition use of Incirlik air base. In July a deal was sealed between the international coalition and Turkey to allow the U.S. access to Incirlik air base in an expanded role, including the launch of airstrikes against ISIS. Previously U.S. action from Incirlik had been limited to unarmed surveillance flights. The change in action was a game-changer for U.S. efforts in Syria and Iraq in part because of its strategic location in the region. It significantly decreased travel time between the base and Syria, and also allowed increased capabilities for surveillance missions and response times.

As the U.S. moved into its new phase of operations, now including the launching of airstrikes from Incirlik, another game changer for Syria loomed on the horizon. In August 2015 reports began to surface about increasing Russian military presence and weaponry in Syria. Previously, Russian involvement in Syria had occurred mostly in political and diplomatic sphere. However, with a new August came a new military dimension of this involvement that would dramatically change the nature of the conflict.

<sup>496</sup> Obama, Barack, “Press Conference by the President,” *Office of the White House Press Secretary*, July 15, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/07/15/press-conference-president>.



**EIGHT**      RUSSIAN MILITARY  
INTERVENTION  
(AUGUST 2015)

■ ■      This is not some superpower  
chessboard contest... Mr. Putin had to  
go into Syria not out of strength but  
out of weakness, because his client,  
Mr. Assad, was crumbling.

*President Obama, October 2, 2015*



“Russia is ‘pouring gasoline on the Islamic State phenomenon.’”

*Secretary of Defense Ash Carter, September 24, 2015*

August 2015 brought a new dimension to the conflict in Syria and significantly changed the equation of the conflict and thus also U.S. policy on the issue. The major game changer was a secret deal that was revealed later in January 2016. According to a document that was posted on a Russian government website, in August the two countries had reached an agreement on aerial support of the Russian forces to the Syrian regime. In this document that was dated to August 26, 2015, the Russian government “made an open-ended commitment to its military deployment in Syria.”<sup>497</sup> An English translation of the agreement that was posted was provided *The Washington Post*. The document outlined the following points as the major takeaways of the agreement:

1. Upon the request of the Syrian side, the Russian Federation is deploying a Russian aviation group on the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic;
2. For the deployment of the Russian aviation group, the Syrian side provides Hmeimim airbase in Latakia province, with its infrastructure, as well as the required territory agreed upon between the parties;
3. The engagement of the Russian aviation group shall be carried out upon the decision of the commander of the group and in

<sup>497</sup> Birnbaum, Michael, “The secret pact between Russia and Syria that gives Moscow carte blanche,” *The Washington Post*, January 15, 2016. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/world-views/wp/2016/01/15/the-secret-pact-between-russia-and-syria-that-gives-moscow-carte-blanche/>

accordance with the plans agreed upon between the parties.<sup>498</sup>

This agreement allowed for active involvement of the Russian military into the conflict in Syria and provided opportunity for Russia to protect and secure its allied regime in the country. However, while the parties were reaching this agreement, there was not much awareness in the U.S. administration about the extent of the discussions. The historic ties between Russia and Syria are well known by the international community, and since the beginning of the conflict in Syria the Russian government had tried to protect the survival of the Syrian regime by providing military assistance for the country. It had also vetoed several resolutions at the UN Security Council aimed at the Assad regime. Following the use of chemical weapons by the regime, Russia also played a role in deterring airstrikes against the regime by Western powers. However, the international community was expecting that this would be the limit of possible Russian involvement to the conflict, especially after its “Ukraine adventure” and strong international pressure over the Russian government, including economic sanctions, following the annexation of Crimea. These expectations proved to be unfounded. In the very early days of September, U.S. news outlets began to report that President Putin was in the process of launching an expansion of Russian military support for the Syrian government.<sup>499</sup>

Following Twitter rumours about the presence of the Russian soldiers in different parts of Syria, a *New York Times* story reported that a rapid military buildup in Syria by the Russian forces was underway. According to this report, the Russian moves included “the recent transport of prefabricated housing units for hundreds of people to a Syrian airfield and the delivery of a portable air traffic control station.”<sup>500</sup> It was also mentioned that the Russian government had requested military overflight permission from

<sup>498</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>499</sup> Gordon, Michael & Eric Schmitt, “Russian Moves in Syria Pose Concerns for U.S.,” *The New York Times*, September 4, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/05/world/middleeast/russian-moves-in-syria-pose-concerns-for-us.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/05/world/middleeast/russian-moves-in-syria-pose-concerns-for-us.html?_r=0)

<sup>500</sup> *ibid.*

neighboring countries. In the piece, the U.S. officials expressed uncertainty about Russia's intentions for the buildup. There were different theories for this sudden buildup, which included a Russian attempt to protect its interest in its naval base and to fight against ISIS. Administration officials made statements to various different outlets expressing more confusion than a clear explanation of Russian actions. While these debates were going on in Washington, D.C., President Putin denounced the commentary as premature.<sup>501</sup> On September 5th, the day after the *Times* report, Secretary of State John Kerry called Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov to discuss the administration's concerns about the suggested imminent enhancement of Russian presence in Syria. During this call the Secretary expressed that the U.S. did not support this possibility, which could lead to further escalation of the conflict (and in turn greater loss of life), increased refugee flows, and the risk of unwanted confrontation between the U.S. Coalition operations in Syria and whatever mandate Moscow was about to uptake.<sup>502</sup>

Russia denied in the following days that its forces were in Syria, maintaining that Moscow, in the words of FM Lavrov, "has never concealed that it delivers military equipment to official Syrian authorities with the aim of combating terrorism."<sup>503</sup> The Russian Information Minister put forward, "There are no Russian forces and there is no Russian military action on Syrian territory."<sup>504</sup> This was a direct contradiction with what was circulating in Western press about the Russian military buildup. Speaking to CNN, Special Envoy John Allen iterated his displeasure at the idea of Russian combat forces in Syria. "Much of the instability in the region is

<sup>501</sup> Al-Arabia, "Putin: Premature to talk about Russian military action against ISIS," September 4, 2015, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/09/04/Premature-to-talk-about-Russian-military-action-against-ISIS-Putin-.html>.

<sup>502</sup> Office of the U.S. Department of State Spokesperson, "Readout of Secretary Kerry's Call with Foreign Minister Lavrov," September 5, 2015, <http://www.state.gov/t/pa/prs/ps/2015/09/246664.htm>.

<sup>503</sup> <http://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/1.675162>

<sup>504</sup> *Haaretz*, "Syria Denies Russian Military Buildup in the Country," September 8, 2015, <http://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/1.675162>.

a direct result of the actions of Bashar al-Assad, and to prop him up with military force creates an additional crisis in the region,” he put forward.<sup>505</sup> U.S. military intelligence sources, however, maintained that there was clear evidence that Russia was sending troops and military hardware at both the Russian naval facility in Tartus and at al-Assad International Airport.

The U.S. continued its diplomatic dialogue with Russia as Secretary Kerry spoke with Russian FM Lavrov again in the middle of the month. The Secretary again reiterated the U.S.’s position that Moscow’s military support for Assad risked exacerbating and extending the conflict in Syria, as well as undermining the goal of fighting extremists in the region. He also emphasized that the U.S. would welcome constructive Russian action such that they would complement counter-ISIS efforts.<sup>506</sup> Secretary of Defense Ash Carter also pursued a similar conversation with Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu, discussing areas where the U.S. and Russia’s interests and goals both overlapped and diverged. The pair, according to the official call readout, agreed for further discussions on how to de-conflict actions in Syria and the counter-ISIS campaign.<sup>507</sup> However, these conversations failed to bring clarity to the Russian motivation for its military buildup in the region.

Concerns of the administration on the buildup continued to emerge from among the administration officials. A *Fox News* report quoted multiple U.S. officials’ concerns about Russia’s military buildup in Syria, calling the intervention “unprecedented,” with one telling the news agency that it compares in scope to Putin’s incursion into Crimea. The Pentagon, according to the report, had not seen evidence that the newly arrived Russian troops were, as of yet, engaging in combat. This did little to mollify the

<sup>505</sup> Tapper Jake, Interview with General John Allen, “*Counter-ISIS Coalition Anniversary*,” *CNN*, September 10, 2015, <http://www.state.gov/s/seci/246798.htm>.

<sup>506</sup> Office of the State Department Spokesperson, “Readout of Secretary Kerry’s Call With Foreign Minister Lavrov,” September 15, 2015, <http://www.state.gov/t/pa/prs/ps/2015/09/246963.htm>.

<sup>507</sup> Cook, Peter, “Readout of Secretary Carter’s Call with Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Shoygu,” *U.S. Department of Defense Press Operations*, September 18, 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/News/News-Releases/News-Release-View/Article/617775/readout-of-secretary-carters-call-with-russian-minister-of-defense-sergei-shoygu>.

administration, which continued to view the developments as a cause for concern.<sup>508</sup> As the buildup became more obvious, administration officials became more open in their criticisms. The ignorance of these criticisms and of the warnings issued by U.S. officials to Russia generated further frustration in Washington. This reflected itself in the statements by different administration officials. For instance, Secretary Carter called the idea that by expanding its military buildup in Syria, Russia is actually “pouring gasoline on the Islamic State phenomenon.”<sup>509</sup> However, the administration was careful not to destroy all the bridges between the U.S. and the Russian government. After making this strong comment, Secretary Carter suggested that “the Obama administration is willing to work with Russia and may be easing off its long-held position that Mr. Assad’s ouster be a precondition for peace talks with U.S. backed opposition in Syria- as long as the ultimate goal remains political transition in Damascus.”<sup>510</sup>

The increasing complexity of the situation on the ground paired with increasing confusion of Russia’s intentions in Syria generated more question marks about the administration’s Syria policy. On the one hand, there was the increasing military buildup of Russia, and on the other hand, there were constant messages from the Russian side in regards to the absence of any military goals at this point. For instance, days before the Russian air forces launched airstrikes in Syria President Putin reiterated that he had no plans “right now” to deploy combat troops to Syria, but affirmed that the Kremlin would continue to back the Syrian government. During an interview with CBS’s 60-Minutes the Russian President said, “Russia will not participate in any troop operations in the territory of Syria or in any other states.” He pointed to the administration’s underwhelm-

<sup>508</sup> Tomlinson, Lucas and Jennifer Griffin, “Russian military build-up in Syria “unprecedented,” officials say,” *FoxNews.com*, September 10, 2015, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2015/09/09/russian-military-build-up-in-syria-unprecedented-officials-say.html>.

<sup>509</sup> Taylor, Guy, “Ashton Carter: Russian buildup in Syria could “pour gasoline” on ISIS,” *The Washington Times*, September 24, 2015, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/sep/24/carter-russian-buildup-syria-could-pour-gas-isis/>.

<sup>510</sup> *Ibid.*

ing “train and equip program,” before defending the Syrian government as the only legitimate actor in Syria.<sup>511</sup>

At the UN General Assembly meetings at the end of September 2015, President Obama made a speech stating that military power at this point was not sufficient to resolve the crisis in Syria. In his speech he said that “Nowhere is our commitment to international order more tested than in Syria.” He said that the U.S. was prepared to work with any nation, including Russia and Iran, to resolve the conflict. “This work will take time. There are no easy answers to Syria,” he said.<sup>512</sup> During the UN meetings, there was also a bilateral meeting between President Obama and President Putin. The administration was trying to make sense of the Russian goals in Syria and figure out how to properly interpret Russia’s this military buildup.

While it was obvious that the Russian military would imminently begin airstrikes, Secretary Carter instructed his staff to “open lines of communication with Russia on deconflicting,” the situation as the possibility of unwanted military encounters between air operations of Russian and Coalition forces began to haunt the administration.<sup>513</sup> The directive by Secretary Carter was an attempt to ensure that American operations would not be disrupted by Russian military activity as Moscow began airstrikes in Syria at the close of the month.<sup>514</sup> Speaking at a meeting in International Peace and Security and Countering Terrorism at the UN, Secretary Kerry reiterated that the U.S. would be supportive of genuine effort against ISIS and al-Qaeda undertaken by

<sup>511</sup> Rose, Charlie interview with Vladimir Putin, “All Eyes on Putin,” *Charlie Rose*, aired: September 27, 2015, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/vladimir-putin-russian-president-60-minutes-charlie-rose/>.

<sup>512</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by President Obama to the United Nations General Assembly,” Remarks, September 28, 2015 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/28/remarks-president-obama-unt-ed-nations-general-assembly>.

<sup>513</sup> RT, “Pentagon to open “lines of communication” with Russia over strikes in Syria,” September 29, 2015, <https://www.rt.com/news/316987-pentagon-russia-communications-syria/>.

<sup>514</sup> Cooper, Helene & Michael Gordon, “Russia Buildup Seen as Fanning Flames in Syria,” *The New York Times*, September 29, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/30/world/russia-buildup-seen-as-fanning-flames-in-syria.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/30/world/russia-buildup-seen-as-fanning-flames-in-syria.html?_r=0).

Moscow, while saying that the U.S. “will not be confused” in the fight against ISIS with support for Assad.<sup>515</sup>

After the commencement of Russia’s airstrike program in Syria, the Syria question became more challenging for the United States. The Obama administration had to deal with criticisms about its inability to stop the expansion of the Russian influence in the region as well as with the new reality on the ground brought about by Russian action. Options available to the U.S. to deal with the Syrian crisis also became narrowed. In a first assessment of these bombings, the Institute for the Study of War concluded:

Russian airstrikes continue to bolster the Assad regime’s efforts to defeat the Syrian opposition. Russian airstrikes from October 19-20 primarily supported ongoing regime ground offensives in rebel-held areas in the southern countryside of Aleppo, the al-Ghab plain of northwestern Hama Province, and the Jebel al-Akrad mountain range in northeastern Latakia Province. The regime is launching probing attacks in Jebel al-Akrad and the al-Ghab plan, likely in order to fix rebel forces in Hama and Latakia Provinces. This effort will prevent rebel forces from reinforcing positions in Aleppo Province, where the regime and its allies have launched their main effort. Russia’s air campaign continues to marginalize moderate elements of the Syrian opposition by targeting moderate, U.S.-backed TOW anti-tank missile recipients.<sup>516</sup>

In fact, as was a common assessment amongst observers of the Russian involvement in Syria, the U.S. administration also got the impression that the main target of airstrikes was not ISIS, but rather Syrian opposition forces fighting the Assad regime.

Following these developments, President Obama held a press conference in an effort to clarify its Syria policy. During this conference, the president said that the reason Assad was still in power was because of Russian and Iranian support for the regime. Furthermore, the president put forward that the international community needed to make it clear to President Putin that the only way to solve the problem in Syria was “to have a

<sup>515</sup> Kerry, John, “Remarks at the Meeting on International Peace and Security and Countering Terrorism,” U.S. Department of State, September 30, 2015, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2015/09/247639.htm>.

<sup>516</sup> Casagrande, Genevieve, “Russian Airstrikes in Syria: September 20 - October 20, 2015,” Institute for the Study of War, October 21, 2015, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-airstrikes-syria-september-30-october-20-2015>.

political transition that is inclusive- that keeps the state intact, that keeps the military intact, that maintains cohesion, but that is inclusive- and the only way to accomplish that is for Mr. Assad to transition, because you cannot rehabilitate him in the eyes of Syrians.”<sup>517</sup> He clarified that the U.S. would not impose a military solution, instead saying, “Eventually Syria will fall, the Assad regime will fall, and we have to have somebody who we’re working with that we can help pick up the pieces and stitch back together a cohesive, coherent country.”<sup>518</sup> This admission of course took place following a high number of question marks about the outcome of this program. In this conference, President Obama also responded to the several articles evaluating the situation in Syria for a possible conflict between U.S. and Russia and stated that Syria will not turn into a proxy war between the U.S. and Russia.<sup>519</sup> During the press conference the President also spoke about the train equip program. He acknowledged that the program had “not worked in the way it was supposed to.”

Later it was revealed that during a meeting with senior aids before the press conference the President and his administration decided it would not directly confront the Kremlin over its recently launched air campaign in Syria.<sup>520</sup> Members of the administration thought that the Russian intervention would likely result in a significant burden for Russian government that would impact the longevity of the operation. In fact, some administration officials said that the Syria intervention of Russia would turn into a major

<sup>517</sup> Barack Obama, “Press Conference by the President,” Remarks, October 2, 2015 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/10/02/press-conference-president>.

<sup>518</sup> Barack Obama, “Press Conference by the President,” Remarks, October 2, 2015 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/10/02/press-conference-president>.

<sup>519</sup> Barack Obama, “Press Conference by the President,” Remarks, October 2, 2015 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/10/02/press-conference-president>.

<sup>520</sup> DeYoung, Karin, Juliet Eilperin, & Greg Miller, “U.S. will not directly confront Russia in Syria, Obama says,” *The Washington Post*, October 2, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/2015/10/02/44c1f7fc-6932-11e5-9223-70cb36460919\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/2015/10/02/44c1f7fc-6932-11e5-9223-70cb36460919_story.html).

quagmire for the Russian government.<sup>521</sup> At the time, the main expectation among members of the administration was that the Russian government would ultimately fail in its endeavor to support the Assad regime. Part of this would be the result of the alienation of Sunni populated countries towards Russia because of its support for the minority Assad regime. This was also seen as having the potential to bring geopolitical challenges for Russia in the long run.<sup>522</sup> Because of this, members of the administration very self-confidently stated that the Russian intervention to Syria was “doomed to fail.”<sup>523</sup> Another frequently stated opinion during this period was the fact that the Russian intervention was not a show of strength but a weakness on the part of the Russian ally in the Syrian conflict. President Obama stated in multiple instances that “this is not some superpower chessboard contest....Mr. Putin had to go into Syria not out of strength but out of weakness, because his client, Mr. Assad, was crumbling.”<sup>524</sup>

Through these arguments of “quagmire” and “weakness of Russian ally”, the U.S. administration was trying to respond to the criticisms of its failure to respond Russian aggression. However, many experts and observers were still concerned about the possible negative outcomes of increasing Russian involvement to the conflict. Accordingly, former administration officials, such as former Ambassador Robert Ford, expressed serious concerns about the impact of the Russian military strikes on the U.S. covert programs in the country, which were already encountering significant problems.<sup>525</sup> There was also some concern about the potential influence of this development to the relations between U.S. and the Syrian opposition. The expectation was that the situation would increase the frustration of the members of the

<sup>521</sup> Ibid.

<sup>522</sup> Ibid.

<sup>523</sup> Ferdinando, Lisa, “Carter: Russia “Doomed to Fail” in Syria; ISIL Must be Defeated,” *DoD News, Defense MEdia Activity*, October 30, 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/News-Article-View/Article/626828/carter-russia-doomed-to-fail-in-syria-isil-must-be-defeated>.

<sup>524</sup> DeYoung, Karin, Juliet Eilperin, & Greg Miller, “U.S. will not directly confront Russia in Syria, Obama says,”

<sup>525</sup> *ibid.*

opposition toward the U.S. administration. Ambassador Ford stated that the members of the Syrian opposition started to believe that “the Americans don’t do as much as the Russians do for their side of the conflict.”<sup>526</sup>

These concerns were later proved to be right. Shortly after the beginning of Russian airstrikes, it was documented by U.S. officials that Russian Air Force units were intentionally targeting U.S.-backed opposition forces. This proved that the main intention of Russia was not fighting against the ISIS but rather to counter against Syrian opposition advances.<sup>527</sup> Speaking in Madrid, Secretary Carter said that Russia’s behavior would “escalate the [Syrian] civil war, putting further at risk the very political resolution and preservation of Syria’s structure of future governance it says that it wants. The U.S. position is clear that a long lasting defeat of ISIL and extremism in Syria can only be achieved if pursued in parallel with a political transition in Syria.”<sup>528</sup> However, once again the administration was careful not to totally antagonize the Russian government. Secretary Carter, in another remark, stated that the administration would continue to support the moderate Syrian opposition. It would also continue to keep the door open for the Russians to contribute to a diplomatic resolution. He said, “We will seek an agreement with the Russians on professional safety procedures for the U.S.’s strategy in Syria, and will leave the door open for Russia to rejoin the track toward a political transition in Damascus.”<sup>529</sup>

Later, the impact of the Russian intervention to the relations between U.S. and Syrian opposition was revealed. In a report Russian attempt to re-

<sup>526</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>527</sup> Entous, Adam, “U.S. Sees Russian Drive Against CIA-Backed Rebels in Syria,” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 5, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-concludes-russia-targeting-cia-backed-rebels-in-syria-1444088319>.

<sup>528</sup> Carter, Ashton, “Remarks at Spanish Center for Advanced Studies of National Defense: Strong and Principled Security Cooperation,” *U.S. Department of Defense*, October 5, 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech-View/Article/621829/remarks-at-spanish-center-for-advanced-studies-of-national-defense-strong-and-p>.

<sup>529</sup> Pellerin, Cheryl, “Carter Addresses Syria, Afghanistan, Modern NATO Mission,” *DoD News, Defense Media Activity*, October 8, 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/News-Article-View/Article/622446/carter-addresses-syria-afghanistan-modern-nato-mission>.

cruit the members of the opposition that were supported by the covert program of the U.S. administration was uncovered. Accordingly members of the Russian administration were approaching the military leaders of the Syrian opposition and promising to support them. A military commander of the opposition forces detailed to a reporter, “They told me, ‘We will support you forever. We won’t leave you on your own like your old friends did.’”<sup>530</sup> The report also stated that “The secret outreach shows that as it works to muscle the U.S. out of Syria, Russia isn’t just bombing the U.S.’s current and former rebel allies — it’s also working to co-opt them, launching a shadowy campaign that seeks to highlight U.S. weakness in Syria.”<sup>531</sup>

A second issue on the administration’s plate was the fate of the train and equip program. Although there were reports that the U.S. intended to stop the train and equip program, administration officials continued to say that U.S. intended to continue this program in Syria.<sup>532</sup> However, despite the claims that the train and equip program would continue, the White House announced in early October that the program would take an “operational pause.” Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes said in an interview with Al-Jazeera that the program had, “not gone as [the administration] would have like to have gone.” “This is a complicated situation, we have to learn from our different policies in Syria,” he concluded.<sup>533</sup> The administration planned to use this time to revamp the program, taking some of the leaders of groups who were already fighting on the ground, putting them through the same rigorous vetting process used in the original program, and then giving them basic equipment packages to distribute to their fighting forces.

<sup>530</sup> Giglio, Mike, “Russia Is Recruiting the U.S.’s Rebel Allies In Syria,” *BuzzFeed*, June 9, 2016, [https://www.buzzfeed.com/mikegiglio/russia-is-recruiting-the-uss-rebel-allies-in-syria?utm\\_term=.ixKxebMBZk#.nxMx3JMLQW](https://www.buzzfeed.com/mikegiglio/russia-is-recruiting-the-uss-rebel-allies-in-syria?utm_term=.ixKxebMBZk#.nxMx3JMLQW).

<sup>531</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>532</sup> Cook, Peter, “Department of Defense Press Briefing,” *U.S. Department of Defense*, September 8, 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/News/News-Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/616516/department-of-defense-press-briefing-by-pentagon-press-secretary-peter-cook-in>.

<sup>533</sup> Hasan Mehdi interview with Ben Rhodes, Al Jazeera English Up Front, September 25, 2015, <http://pr.aljazeera.com/post/129845054685/al-jazeera-englishs-upfront-interview-with>.

Under Secretary of Defense Christine Wormuth explained this strategy in a press call on the counter-ISIL campaign held with Deputy National Security Advisor Rhodes and Deputy Special Envoy McGurk.<sup>534</sup> Days later, the U.S. military dropped 50 tons of ammunition, M-16s, AK-47s, grenades, and mortar and rocket-propelled grenade rounds to opposition forces battling ISIS in northern Syria.<sup>535</sup> It was reported that Kurdish fighters were some of the main recipients of the airdrops. However, during a press briefing, Pentagon Spokesman Peter Cook rebuffed these claims saying, “My understanding is that this specifically went to Syrian Arab forces.” The emerging situation complicated the U.S. relationship with Turkey, since the main beneficiary of this military aid was the YPG forces in the Northern Syria.

As the situation on the ground became increasingly complicated, the administration was still trying to clarify the position of the U.S. in Syria. In a testimony presented to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Anne Patterson outlined the four major components of the evolving U.S. strategy for Syria as the following,

1. Defeat ISIL militarily in both Syria and Iraq;
2. Develop a political transition that gives Syria a future without Bashar al-Assad;
3. Ease the suffering of the Syrian people;
4. Stabilize our regional allies and help European partners as they cope with a massive refugee crisis.<sup>536</sup>

She continued, “Our strategy regarding the Syrian conflict remains fundamentally the same, to leverage military action and diplomacy to achieve

<sup>534</sup> Press Call by Ben Rhodes and Brett McGurk, “Press Call on the Counter-ISIL Campaign,” *Office of the White House Press Secretary*, October 9, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/10/09/press-call-counter-isil-campaign>.

<sup>535</sup> Gibbons-Neff Thomas, “Pentagon airdrops ammunition to groups fighting the Islamic State,” *The Washington Post*, October 12, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2015/10/12/pentagon-airdrops-ammunition-to-groups-fighting-the-islamic-state/>.

<sup>536</sup> Anne Patterson, Testimony Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, November 4, 2015, <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA00/20151104/104160/HHRG-114-FA00-Wstate-PattersonA-20151104.pdf>.

a political transition in which Syrians ultimately have a government that respects the rights of its people and Syria retains its unity, independence, territorial integrity and secular character.”<sup>537</sup> Later another attempt to clarify the U.S. policy in Syria came from Secretary Kerry. Kerry put forward:

Having made peaceful change impossible, Assad made war inevitable. And this war gave rise to Daesh – ISIL – the gravest extremist threat faced by our generation and the embodiment of evil in our time. From the beginning of this crisis, there has not been a single idea for addressing the Syrian conflict that has been discussed in public that hasn't been the subject of intense scrutiny within the Administration. Whatever questions one might have about the content of our policy, there should no doubt about the effort made to consider every single option for ending this crisis. To that end, President Obama has set for our nation three interrelated goals. President made it clear that the United States was committed to the defeat and dismantlement of this terrorist organization. Second, we are intensifying our diplomatic effort to finally bring an end to the civil war in Syria. And third, we are determined to support our friends in the region, and to ensure that the instability created by the Syrian crisis does not spread further beyond its borders.<sup>538</sup>

In the meantime, there was a personnel change in the administration's counter-ISIS team. The State Department announced that Special Envoy John Allen would be replaced by his deputy, Brett McGurk.<sup>539</sup> This corresponded with a change in the approach to fight against ISIS. Secretary Carter testified to the Senate Armed Services Committee that, in Syria, new emphasis would be placed on the Syrian Arab Coalition to working towards destroying ISIS's capital in Raqqa. He expressed disappointment with the train and equip program, and said that the new program would be developed to focus on working with vetted leaders of groups already fighting ISIL, building on successes of Syrian Arabs and Kurds.<sup>540</sup> Later

<sup>537</sup>Ibid.

<sup>538</sup> John Kerry, “Remarks on the U.S. Strategy in Syria,” Remarks, November 12, 2015 (online by the U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2015/11/249454.htm>.

<sup>539</sup> Kerry, John, “Departure of Special Presidential Envoy John Allen and Appointment of Brett McGurk,” *U.S. Department of State*, October 23, 2015, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2015/10/248665.htm>

<sup>540</sup> Crong, Terri Moon, “Carter Outlines Strategy to Counter ISIL at Senate Armed Services Hearing,” *DoD News, Defense Media Activity*, October 27, 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/News-Article-View/Article/626113/carter-outlines-strategy-to-counter-isil-at-senate-armed-services-hearing>.

in the hearing, under questioning from Senator Graham, Secretary Carter stated that the U.S.'s principal efforts to ensure Assad transitions out of power in Syria are diplomatic, rather than militaristic. General Joseph Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, acknowledged that the "balance of forces" in Syria had shifted in favor of Assad.<sup>541</sup>

Following the failure of the train and equip program and the Russian intervention in Syria, the administration one more time launched an effort to find a diplomatic solution for the crisis. During the November 14th Vienna Negotiations, world powers agreed to pursue political negotiations between the regime and opposition forces before the end of the year, and that the negotiations would be followed by a UN-backed ceasefire agreement. The administration was hopeful that this agreement and ceasefire it proposed would pave the way for a refocus of efforts on ISIS. The talks came just a day after multiple terrorist attacks were conducted across Paris by ISIS. Secretary Kerry said, "The Paris attacks have shown, alongside with ISIS claiming responsibility, that it doesn't matter if you are for Assad or against him, ISIS is your enemy." Speaking directly to the day's negotiations, Secretary Kerry told a press conference:

Today, Sergey Lavrov and I and Staffan joined representatives from the Arab League, China, Egypt, the European Union, France, Germany, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the UAE, the UK, and the United Nations. We still differ, obviously, on the issue of what happens with Bashar al-Assad. But we are relying on the political process itself – led by Syrians, which it will be, going forward, and with Syrians negotiating with Syrians – that that can help to bring a close to this terrible chapter. We do agree on this: It is time for the bleeding in Syria to stop. It is time to deprive the terrorists of any single kilometer in which to hide. It is time that we come together to help the Syrian people embark on the difficult but extraordinarily high imperative of rebuilding their country.<sup>542</sup>

Just a day later, prior to the opening of G20 meetings in Antalya, Turkey, President Obama briefly spoke with President Putin about Syria. The

<sup>541</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>542</sup> Kerry, John, "Press Availability with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura," *U.S. Department of State*, November 14, 2015, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2015/11/249515.htm>.

leaders allegedly agreed on the need for political transition in the country. "Russia has not officially committed to a transition of Assad moving out, but they did agree to the political transition process. And I think we'll find out over the next several weeks whether or not we can bring about that change of perspective with the Russians," the president said.<sup>543</sup> At the conclusion of the G20 summit, President Obama held a press conference in which he discussed diplomatic progress in ending the Syrian civil war:

We've begun to see some modest progress on the diplomatic front, which is critical because a political solution is the only way to end the war in Syria and unite the Syrian people and the world against ISIL. The Vienna talks mark the first time that all the key countries have come together -- as a result, I would add, of American leadership -- and reached a common understanding.<sup>544</sup>

Later in a press conference with the French President François Hollande, following the Paris attacks, President Obama was more straightforward about the Vienna process and the Assad regime. In his remarks he stated:

With respect to Mr. Assad, I think we've got to let the Vienna process play itself out. It is our best opportunity. And so the notion that there would be an immediate date in advance of us getting a broad agreement on that political process and the details I think doesn't make sense. As soon as we have a framework for a political transition -- potentially, a new constitution, elections -- I think it's in that context that we can start looking at Mr. Assad choosing not to run and potentially seeing a new Syria emerge.<sup>545</sup>

Amid further questions and concerns, President Obama one more time expressed its administration's policy in regards to the Assad regime and Syria in a press conference. He said:

<sup>543</sup> Kreiter, Marcy, "US President Barack Obama Calls on Russia To Change Its Approach To Syria To Defeat ISIS," *International Business Times*, <http://www.ibtimes.com/us-president-barack-obama-calls-russia-change-its-approach-syria-defeat-isis-2195299>.

<sup>544</sup> Obama, Barack, "Press Conference by President Obama -- Antalya, Turkey," *Office of the White House Press Secretary*, November 16, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/11/16/press-conference-president-obama-antalya-turkey>.

<sup>545</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks by President Obama and President Hollande of France in Joint Press Conference," Remarks, November 24, 2015 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/11/24/remarks-president-obama-and-president-hollande-france-joint-press>.

Now, where [the U.S. and Russia] continue to have an ongoing difference is not on the need for a political settlement; it's the issue of whether Mr. Assad can continue to serve as President while still bringing the civil war to an end. It's been my estimation for five years now that that's not possible. It is possible, however, to preserve the Syrian state, to have an inclusive government in which the interests of the various groups inside of Syria are represented.<sup>546</sup>

At the close of 2015, Secretary Kerry issued a statement that confused the observers and analysts of Obama administration's Syria policy. During Secretary Kerry's Moscow trip he stated, "The United States and our partners are not seeking regime change in Syria," he said, marking an unprecedented departure from the administration's half decade-long policy that any solution to the crisis in Syria would not include the Assad regime.<sup>547</sup> He went further and asked the Syrian opposition not to make Assad's departure a precondition for negotiations with the Syrian regime.

2016 opened with a fresh attempt by the UN Special Envoy de Mistura to convene another conference on Syria in Geneva. The move was welcomed by the U.S. administration. During a press conference, Secretary Kerry urged the opposition groups to attend the talks. He also hinted that the administration might be willing to renew its nonlethal assistance to certain groups, an offer that had been previously taken off the table amid concerns that supplies had been captured by militant groups rather than reaching the intended recipients.<sup>548</sup>

The new conference was not convened without challenges. Whether or not the Kurdish PYD would take part in the conference became a major issue. The Turkish government was totally opposed to the idea of the PYD's participation in the talks. Representatives of the Turkish government even

<sup>546</sup> Barack Obama, "Press Conference by President Obama," Briefing, December 1, 2015 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/12/01/press-conference-president-obama>.

<sup>547</sup> Kramer, Andrew E., "John Kerry Visits Moscow to Prepare for Talks on Syria," *The New York Times*, December 15, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/16/world/europe/john-kerry-visits-moscow-to-prepare-for-talks-on-syria.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/16/world/europe/john-kerry-visits-moscow-to-prepare-for-talks-on-syria.html?_r=0).

<sup>548</sup> Gordon, Michael R., "Kerry Urges Syrian Rebels to Go to Peace Meeting," *The New York Times*, January 14, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/15/world/middleeast/us-presses-syrian-opposition-to-join-talks.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/15/world/middleeast/us-presses-syrian-opposition-to-join-talks.html?_r=1).

threatened to boycott the talks if the PYD was allowed to attend. Ultimately, the PYD was kept out of the invitation list. Despite the resolution of this problem, the Geneva talks continued to face delays. Due to the heavy Russian airstrikes and a blockade of the Assad forces around Aleppo the opposition considered the situation unfeasible for the start of peace talks. The opposition demanded that the regime and Russian forces stop their attacks and sieges before starting the negotiations.<sup>549</sup> After long deliberations and discussions, the peace talks finally started in February 1st, 2016. Again, however, the talks did not proceed as smoothly as hoped. Following the beginning of the major offensive on the city of Aleppo by the Syrian regime with the air support of Russia, UN Envoy de Mistura suspended the talks between the parties. During a White House press briefing, Press Secretary Josh Earnest addressed the U.S. perspective on the actions of the Syrian regime and Russian attacks on Aleppo saying, “Certainly it is not going to prevent the United States from continuing to push forward the political transition process to try to get Assad out of power so that we can begin to address the political chaos that’s the root of so many problems in that country.” He also welcomed an offer from Saudi Arabia to deploy ground troops in Syria, but first advised that the U.S. needed to make sure that their commitment would be integrated into the overall effort.<sup>550</sup>

From February 11th to 12th the International Syrian Support Group (ISSG) met in Munich to discuss the now critical humanitarian situation in besieged areas of Syria as well as the path forward to trying to secure peace.<sup>551</sup> The ISSG reaffirmed its readiness to ensure a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition based on the Geneva Communiqué in its entirety; press for the end of any indiscriminate use of weapons; support

<sup>549</sup> BBC. “Syria conflict: Opposition sets terms for Geneva peace talks,” January 31, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35452640>.

<sup>550</sup> Earnest, Josh, “Daily Press Briefing,” *Office of the White House Press Secretary*, February 5, 2016, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/02/05/press-briefing-press-secretary-josh-earnest-252016>.

<sup>551</sup> Office of the State Department Spokesperson, “Statement of the International Syria Support Group,” February 11, 2016, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/02/252428.htm>.

and accelerate the agreement and implementation of a nationwide ceasefire; facilitate immediate humanitarian access to besieged and hard-to-reach areas and the release of any arbitrarily detained persons; and fight terrorism. An announcement was made by Secretary Kerry and Russian FM Lavrov, saying that they had agreed to follow a “cessation of hostilities” within a week.<sup>552</sup> By the end of the February, they finally the agreed upon cessation of hostilities went into effect. This move was considered an opportunity by the members of the U.S. administration usher in resolve to the conflict in Syria. Of course part of this success was dependent on the actions of Russia and Syrian regime. State Department Deputy Spokesperson Mark Toner answered questions about the consequence of Russia’s actions by stating, “it is time for them to show, through action rather than words, that they are serious about what they profess to be serious about, which is a ceasefire or a cessation of hostilities and a political process that leads to a transition.” He refuses to comment on the “Plan B” that media outlets reported and Secretary Kerry alluded to in his testimony for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. A day after the ceasefire took effect, President Obama, during his weekly address, said that the only way to defeat ISIL is to end the civil war in Syria. He said the ceasefire agreement would be, if successful, a critical part of this process. “We’re not under any illusions,” he said, however, “There are plenty of reasons for skepticism [about the cessation].”<sup>553</sup>

Since then there have been various reports indicating the violation of cessation of hostilities in Syria. However, both the U.S. and Russian governments are supporting this process, and with a recent agreement the ceasefire was also extended to include Aleppo.

<sup>552</sup> Ibid.

<sup>553</sup> Obama, Barack, “Weekly Address: Degrading and Destroying ISIL,” *Office of the White House Press Secretary*, February 27, 2016, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/02/27/weekly-address-degrading-and-destroying-isil>.

## TIMELINE OF U.S.-SYRIA RELATIONS (OCTOBER 2008 TO APRIL 2016)

- October 26, 2008 U.S. troops allegedly descended from helicopters to attack Al-Sukkariya, a Syrian enclave five miles west of the Iraqi city Qaim to kill Badran Turki Hishan al -Mazidih - Iraqi sanctioned by U.S. Treasury for allowing supplies to funnel to AQI through Syria. Demonstrated that U.S. taking matters into own hands to address AQI in Syria.<sup>554</sup>
- November 2008 Pres. Obama is elected amidst the suspension of indirect Syrian-Israeli negotiations in reaction to Israel's 2008-2009 Operation Cast Lead in Gaza. Bashar al-Assad declares that Israel's attack on Gaza in December 2008 "closed the door on the Syrian-Israeli indirect talks." Later, the Syria pushes other arab countries to stop endorsing the Arab Peace Initiative with Israel, sponsored by Saudi Arabia. Assad joins Hezbollah and Iran in backing Hamas' call for Israel to unconditionally open its border crossings with Gaza.<sup>555</sup>
- November 2008 Sami Moubayed authors an article about the steps Pres. Obama would have to take to court Syrian favor. This included:
- 1) Re-institution of a U.S. ambassador in Damascus
  - 2) An end to the anti-Syrian rhetoric from the White House and State Department, which had been harsh since 2003
  - 3) Recognition of Syria's attempt to help border security
  - 4) Assistance in some form to help with 1.2 million Iraqi refugees
  - 5) Lifting of sanctions on Damascus
  - 6) Abolition of Syrian Accountability Act
  - 7) Willingness to hold indirect peace talks with Israel
  - 8) Recognition that no problems in Mid-East can be solved without Syria
  - 9) Combat against Islamic fundamentalism
  - 10) Apology for air raid on Syria that left 8 dead in October 2008 and
  - 11) Normalization of relations between Syria and America on a people-to-people level.

<sup>554</sup> Tabler, *In the Lion's Den*, 215.

<sup>555</sup> Sharp, "Syria: Background and U.S. Relations," 2-3.

- November 19, 2008 IAEA puts Syria on its agenda for the al-Kibar reactor.<sup>556</sup>
- February 9, 2009 U.S. Department of Commerce eases restrictions on an export license for Boeing 747 spare parts to Syrian Air, Syria's national airline.<sup>557</sup>
- February 26, 2009: Jeff Feltman, Assistant Sec. of State, and Daniel Shapiro, Middle East expert of the NSC meet with the Syrian Ambassador to the U.S. (Imad Mustapha) to address U.S. concerns about Syrian behavior. Pres. Obama asks Clinton to arrange this meeting 1) to engage with America's adversaries as the underpinning idea of U.S. foreign policy in the new administration and 2) to stave off any chance of Hezbollah's success in the elections scheduled for June 7, so as not to alienate U.S. allies in Lebanon. In the meeting, Feltman raises the issues of Syria's support for terrorism, non-proliferation, intervention in Lebanese politics, and disintegrating human rights standards. After the meeting, Feltman is referred to as too "neo-con" by both Syrian officials and domestic media to be considered an effective negotiator.<sup>558</sup>
- Mid-February 2009 Senator Kerry visits Bashar al-Assad in Damascus.<sup>559</sup> In preparation for his arrival, FM Spokesperson Bushra Kanafani said, "Senator Kerry, like the rest of U.S. delegates arriving in Damascus, is so welcome...We have always called for deep dialogue with Washington to put our relations on the right track, which would serve bilateral interests, security and stability."<sup>560</sup>
- March 7, 2009 Feltman and Shapiro go to Syria in the highest level visit since 2005 to explore Washington's relationship with Damascus.<sup>561</sup> The two provided few specifics about the visit, but they said that the talks "constructive" and that they found "a lot of common ground" (in Feltman's words, especially on

<sup>556</sup> Tabler, *In the Lion's Den*, 219

<sup>557</sup> Sharp, "Syria: Background and U.S. Relations," 2-3.

<sup>558</sup> Tabler, *In the Lion's Den*, 222.

<sup>559</sup> Heather Saul, "Pictures resurface showing US Secretary John Kerry and President Assad dining in Syria together," *The Independent*, September 3, 2013, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/pictures-resurface-showing-us-secretary-john-kerry-and-president-assad-dining-in-syria-together-8796846.html>.

<sup>560</sup> George Baghdadi, "John Kerry to Visit Syrian Capital," *CBS News*, February 12, 2009, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/john-kerry-to-visit-syrian-capital/>.

<sup>561</sup> Elise Labott, "U.S., Syria find 'common ground' in diplomatic talks," *CNN*, March 7, 2009, <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/meast/03/07/US.Syria/index.html?eref=edition>.

- wanting a “unified Iraq”).<sup>562</sup> Instead of setting “benchmarks” for Syria, Feltman and Shapiro say they are looking forward to each country watching the “choices” of the other.<sup>563</sup>
- March 9, 2009 Assad begins to speak publicly; in the following days he offers Israel a “cold peace” and announces he had been asked to mediate between the U.S. and Iran. He demanded U.S. mediation for the Arab-Israeli conflict and requested direct contact with President Obama.<sup>564</sup>
- May 7, 2009 According to Feltman, Feltman and Shapiro revisit Syria “as part of President Obama’s commitments to use diplomacy and to use dialogue in order to try to see where we can move forward, where our interests overlap, and to see where we can try and work together to bridge the difference that remain in some of our policies.” Feltman recognizes improvements in the bilateral relationship compared to two months ago.<sup>565</sup> Also this day, the Obama administration, in accordance with the National Emergencies Act, renews the annual iteration of a National Emergency with respect to Syria. The declaration allows the administration to continue targeted sanctions on government and security officials.<sup>566</sup>
- June 8, 2009 Pres. Obama gives the famous “Cairo Speech” in which he charts a new course for U.S.-Middle East relations, promising characterizes his Middle East policy as centered around the Middle East Peace Process and U.S. withdrawal from Iraq.<sup>567</sup>
- June 13, 2009 U.S. Envoy George Mitchell and Jeff Feltman visit Damascus in the highest level visit since 2005.<sup>568</sup> He announces that Syria is critical for a comprehensive Middle East Peace: “Syria has an integral role to play in reaching comprehensive peace,” Mr. Mitchell said. Both Syria and the United States have the responsibility “to create conditions for negotiations

<sup>562</sup> See Sharp, “Syria: Background and U.S. Relations, 2.)

<sup>563</sup> Tabler, *In the Lion’s Den*, 222.

<sup>564</sup> Tabler, *In the Lion’s Den*, 222-223.

<sup>565</sup> Sharp, “Syria: Background and U.S. Relations,” 3-4.

<sup>566</sup> Sharp, “Syria: Background and U.S. Relations,” 4.

<sup>567</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks By The President On A New Beginning,” Press Release, June 4, 2009 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), [http://www.whitehouse.gov/the\\_press\\_office/Remarks-by-the-President-at-Cairo-University-6-04-09](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-at-Cairo-University-6-04-09).

<sup>568</sup> “Mitchell Cites Syria’s Role in Mideast Peace Effort,” *The New York Times*, June 13, 2009, [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/14/world/middleeast/14mitchell.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/14/world/middleeast/14mitchell.html?_r=0).

- to begin promptly and end successfully.” He also offered, “It’s my hope that we can also see full diplomatic relations and friendship restored between Damascus and Washington at an early day in the New Year.”<sup>569</sup> Days after the visit, the U.S. declares it will reinstate its ambassador.<sup>570</sup>
- Late June 2009      The administration sends Ambassador Hof and a delegation from CENTCOM in June and August 2009 to discuss cutting off the flow of foreign fighters and to assess Syria’s border-monitoring will and capacity.<sup>571</sup>
- Late June 2009      The Obama administration messages that it plans to return an ambassador to the Syrian capital within the next few months.<sup>572</sup> Senator Kerry is reportedly very supportive of this move.<sup>573</sup>
- July 26, 2009      U.S. Envoy Mitchell visits Syria in a further demonstration of thawing U.S.-Syrian relations.<sup>574</sup> Mitchell apparently spent hours with Assad personally reviewing U.S. sanctions after the head of state reiterated its demand that the U.S. pullback its economic pressure.<sup>575</sup> Mitchell called on the Arab world to begin normalization efforts with Israel. Syria said it was “looking forward” to the visit as “the first step of dialogue. He also mentioned that the U.S. was “trying to develop...bilateral issues that we have with the Syrians as well” and that they would discuss those issues at the meeting. Finally, Sen. Mitchell said, “In terms of the Syrian-American relationship, the United States is committed to a dialogue based on mutual interest and mutual respect and a solid foundation for discussion of our shared goals and of real differences, where they occur.”<sup>576</sup>

<sup>569</sup> George Baghdadi, “Syria Hopes for “Natural Relations” with U.S.,” *CBS News*, June 13, 2009, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/syria-hopes-for-natural-relations-with-us/>.

<sup>570</sup> Tabler, *In the Lion’s Den*, 223.

<sup>571</sup> Sharp, “Syria: Background and U.S. Relations,” 4.

<sup>572</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>573</sup> Heather Saul, “Pictures resurface showing US Secretary John Kerry and President Assad dining in Syria together,” *The Independent*, September 3, 2013, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/pictures-resurface-showing-us-secretary-john-kerry-and-president-assad-dining-in-syria-together-8796846.html>.

<sup>574</sup> Josef Ferman, “George Mitchell In Syria: Obama Determined To See “Truly Comprehensive” Mideast Peace,” *The Huffington Post*, August 26, 2009, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/07/26/george-mitchell-in-syria-\\_n\\_245019.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/07/26/george-mitchell-in-syria-_n_245019.html).

<sup>575</sup> Tabler, *In the Lion’s Den*, 223.

<sup>576</sup> “Obama’s Middle East Envoy Steps Up Diplomatic Push in Syria.”

- July 28, 2009 The United States takes steps to ease sanctions on Syria, especially on sectors involving information technology (IT), civil aviation, and communications.<sup>577</sup> 8 July 30, 2009: Pres. Obama extends his presidential authority to enforce EO 13441 that freezing assets of anyone who tries to undermine Lebanon's sovereignty by reissuing a "continuation of National Emergency with Respect to Actions of Certain Persons to Undermine the Sovereignty of Lebanon or its Democratic Processes and Institutions."<sup>578</sup>
- Early/Mid-August 2009 Another CENTCOM delegation visits Damascus and announces that the U.S. will form a tripartite committee with Iraq and Syria to ensure greater border security.<sup>579</sup>
- August 19, 2009 After a visit to Damascus, Iraqi PM al-Maliki is almost blown up in Baghdad. Iraq accused Syria of hosting terrorist camps, which it said were responsible for the attacks.<sup>580</sup> Iraq withdrew its ambassador and engagement. The tripartite security agreement is now dead in the water.<sup>581</sup>
- Late September 2009 Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal al-Miqdad is invited to Washington for high-level talks, almost exclusively on sanctions.<sup>582</sup> This is the first visit by a Syrian official to the U.S. in more than 8 years.<sup>583</sup> FM Walid Moallem declares, "I am optimistic about this visit...the agenda is clear; it is continuing the Syrian-U.S. dialogue to normalize bilateral relations. There are, of course, many obstacles and suspicions after an eight-year suspension of contacts. The gap must be bridged...This is a continuing process and this is part of the dialogue."<sup>584</sup> However, Syria shows little to no flexibility in its foreign policy—it continues its support of U.S.-designated terrorists, refuses to engage in

<sup>577</sup> "Syria's Response to US Engagement," Lebanese Information Center, Fact Sheet, March 15, 2010, <http://www.licus.org/liclib/2010-04-19%20LIC%20FACT%20SHEET-SYRIA's%20RESPONSE%20TO%20US%20ENGAGEMENTEN.pdf>.

<sup>578</sup> Sharp, "Syria: Background and U.S. Relations," 4.

<sup>579</sup> Tabler, "Syria Clenches Its Fist."

<sup>580</sup> Sharp, "Syria: Background and U.S. Relations," 5.

<sup>581</sup> Tabler, *In the Lion's Den*, 226.

<sup>582</sup> Ibid; See also "Syria's Response to US Engagement," Lebanese Information Center, March 15, 2010, <http://www.licus.org/liclib/2010-04-19%20LIC%20FACT%20SHEET-SYRIA's%20RESPONSE%20TO%20US%20ENGAGEMENTEN.pdf>.

<sup>583</sup> Sharp, "Syria: Background and U.S. Relations," 5.

<sup>584</sup> Ibid.

- rapprochement with Israel, and continues its repressive human rights record.
- November 2009 Israel seizes a freighter from Iran to Syrian port of Latakia that is loaded with arms (medium range 107-mm and 122-mm rockets, armor piercing rounds, grenades, Kalashnikov ammunition); it is believed to be destined for use by Hezbollah in Lebanon.<sup>585</sup>
- December 2009 U.S. denies Airbus the ability to sell Syria planes, as Airbus planes are approximately 40% U.S. origin, making them illegal to sell without an export license.
- February 16, 2010 This week, amid growing U.S. pressure for a peace settlement, a “war of words” is exchanged between Syria and Israel after Ehud Barak told the Israeli Defense Forces, that “in the absence of an arrangement with Syria, we are liable to enter a belligerent clash with it that could reach the point of an all-out, regional war...just like the familiar reality in the Middle East, we will immediately sit down [with Syria] after such a war and negotiate on the exact same issues which we have been discussing with them for the last 15 years.” While Barak likely meant it as a way to push Israeli citizens to favor negotiations, Syrian officials responded to the threat of war. Moallem responded, “Israel knows that if it declares war on Syria, such a war will reach its cities.”<sup>586</sup>
- February 17, 2010 Deputy Secretary of State William Burns meets with Bashar al-Assad.<sup>587</sup> The same day, the President announces that Robert Ford will be his choice for Ambassador to Syria.<sup>588</sup> Allegedly, the U.S. and Syria held additional talks soon after to discuss weapons smuggling to Hezbollah through Syria.<sup>589</sup>
- February 18, 2010 U.S. Counterterrorism official Daniel Benjamin meets with Syrian Deputy FM al-Miqdad and is accompanied by a surprise guest, Gen. Ali Mamlouk, head of Syria’s General In-

<sup>585</sup> Charles S. Levinson and Josh Mitnick, “Israeli Navy Seizes Weapons Believed to Be for Hezbollah,” *The Wall Street Journal*, November 5, 2009, <http://www.wsj.com/news/articles/SB125732536158927651>.

<sup>586</sup> “Believe in Israel, Believe in Peace,” Americans for Peace Now, *Middle East Peace Report* 11, No. 18 (February 16, 2010): [http://archive.peacenow.org/entries/peace\\_report\\_february\\_16\\_2010](http://archive.peacenow.org/entries/peace_report_february_16_2010).

<sup>587</sup> “Top US William Burns Envoy in Syria for Talks,” *BBC News*, February 17, 2010, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/8520917.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8520917.stm).

<sup>588</sup> Tabler, *In the Lion’s Den*, 228.

<sup>589</sup> Sharp, “Syria: Background and U.S. Relations,” 6.

- telligence Directorate.<sup>590</sup> The group discusses possible areas of cooperation for counterterrorism.
- February 20, 2010 Syria buys two French airplanes after discussions between France and Syria. It does not violate U.S. sanctions law, but the deal was financed by the Commercial Bank of Syria, which goes around Section 311 of the PATRIOT Act that forbids U.S. financial institutions' ability to work with the CBS.<sup>591</sup>
- February 2010 The IAEA reports that Syria may have been involved in a nuclear program at the al-Kibar facility given the level of uranium particles found in the soil. Previous reports had declared that the uranium was not from Syria's declared inventory.<sup>592</sup>
- February 24, 2010 Clinton tells a Senate committee that the United States was "asking Syria to move away from Iran."<sup>593</sup>
- February 25, 2010 Yet the next day, at what is referred to as the "Axis of Evil Banquet" among Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah, Ahmadinejad and Assad defiantly mock Clinton's request, saying "there is no distance between Iran and Syria..."<sup>594</sup>
- Early March 2010 Syria criticizes the Arab League for approving of proximity talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Syrian officials argued that the move was a way for the Arab League to cover for the decision that the PA had already made.<sup>595</sup>
- March 2010 A 2010 Human Rights Watch report condemned U.S. foreign policy relations with Syria saying it encouraged bad behavior on the part of the government: "Talking to Syria without putting its rights record on the table emboldens the government to believe that it can do whatever it wants to its people, without consequence," and that A message to Syria that says 'We only care about your external affairs' is a green light for repression."
- March 16, 2010 At Robert Ford's nomination hearing, the Ambassador-Designate outlines 5 key issue areas in the U.S.-Syrian bilateral relationship: 1) Syria's help in stabilizing Iraq, 2) stability in Lebanon, 3) Syria's support for talks with Israel, 4) Syria's

<sup>590</sup> "US embassy cables: Syrian spy chief's surprise appearance at US talks," *The Guardian*, December 6, 2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/250462>.

<sup>591</sup> Sharp, "Syria: Background and U.S. Relations," 6.

<sup>592</sup> Ibid.

<sup>593</sup> Tabler, *In the Lion's Den*, 228-229.

<sup>594</sup> Ibid.

<sup>595</sup> Sharp, "Syria: Background and U.S. Relations," 7.

- cooperation with the IAEA, and 5) an improvement in the human rights situation. Sanctions would not be lifted, Ford says, if these are not addressed.<sup>596</sup> Ford said of Syria: “Without significant changes in its policy, Syria will remain on our list of State Sponsors of Terrorism for the foreseeable future. And while we and our friends in the region are working to mitigate Iran’s influence, Syria has helped promote Iran’s destabilizing policies...I do not think that the Syrians will change their policies quickly. Finding avenues of cooperation with Syria will be a step-by-step process that will require patience and steady commitment to our principles.”<sup>597</sup>
- March 31, 2010 Sen. Kerry visits Syria.
- Early April 2010 Syria allegedly transfers Scud missiles to Hezbollah, though Syria denies the accusations.<sup>598</sup> The missiles they sent are thought to have the capability to carry chemical warheads, though there is no evidence that Hezbollah has chemical weapons. The State Department says that it condemns the weapons transfer.<sup>599</sup>
- April 21, 2010 Feltman testifies before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Middle East and South Asia, announcing that the administration plans to send Ambassador Ford to Damascus upon confirmation from the Senate. Feltman states, “As we try to minimize the prospects of war and maximize the chances for peace in a region where our national security is defended by American men and women in uniform, we have no choice but to use all the tools of statecraft at our disposal. We simply must make sure that leaders in Syria and elsewhere understand fully and accurately the position of the U.S. before they act - this is not something to be left to rumor, to second- or third-hand knowledge, or to others. This is our job. To do less amounts to negligence; to unilateral diplomatic disarmament. This is not the option we will pursue.”<sup>600</sup>
- April 22, 2010 Clinton states, “The larger question as to what the United States will do with respect to Syria is one we’ve spent a lot of

<sup>596</sup> Tabler, “How to React to a Reactor.”

<sup>597</sup> Sharp, “Syria: Background and U.S. Relations,” 7.

<sup>598</sup> Mark Landler, “U.S. Speaks to Syrian Envoy of Arms Worries,” *The New York Times*, April 19, 2010, [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/20/world/middleeast/20syria.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/20/world/middleeast/20syria.html?_r=0).

<sup>599</sup> Sharp, “Syria: Background and U.S. Relations,” 8.

<sup>600</sup> *Ibid.*

- time considering and debating inside the administration... Where we are as of today is that we believe it is important to continue the process to return an ambassador; this is not some kind of reward for the Syrians and the actions they take that are deeply disturbing.”<sup>601</sup>
- September 16, 2010 U.S. Envoy George Mitchell visits Syria again in order to persuade it to back Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, but the Golan Heights issue and the seize on the Gaza strip seem to hamper progress.<sup>602</sup>
- January 16, 2011 The United States appoints an ambassador to Syria after withdrawing its chief diplomat in 2005 over suspicions of Syrian involvement in the assassination of Lebanese president Rafik Hariri.<sup>603</sup>
- January 31, 2011 In an interview with WSJ, Assad says Syria is immune to the type of violence shaking North Africa because the regime is “very closely linked to the beliefs of the people.”<sup>604</sup>
- March 16, 2011 Senator John Kerry makes a statement at the Carnegie Endowment, claiming that he believed Assad would reform and engage more meaningfully with the U.S. and its allies: “[M]y judgment is that Syria will move; Syria will change, as it embraces a legitimate relationship with the United States and the West and economic opportunity that comes with it and the participation that comes with it.”<sup>605</sup> By this point in time, he had met with Assad six times in two years. Soon after, he makes this statement: “President Assad has been very generous with me in terms of the discussions we have had,” he said after his March speech. “And when I last went to – the last several trips to Syria – I asked President Assad to do certain things to build the relationship with the

<sup>601</sup> Ibid.

<sup>602</sup> Sarah Birke and Borzou Daragahi, “U.S. envoy Mitchell meets with Syrian president,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 17, 2010, <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/sep/17/world/la-fg-mitchell-syria-20100917>.

<sup>603</sup> “First US ambassador for six years takes up post in Syria,” *The Guardian*, January 16, 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jan/16/new-us-ambassador-syria>.

<sup>604</sup> “Interview With Syrian President Bashar al-Assad,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 31, 2011, <http://www.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052748703833204576114712441122894>.

<sup>605</sup> John Kerry, “Senator John Kerry on U.S Policy Toward the Middle East” (speech at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, DC, March 16, 2011), <http://carnegieendowment.org/files/0317carnegie-johnkerry.pdf>; Rogin, “Kerry: It’s time to give up on Assad the reformer.”

- United States and sort of show the good faith that would help us to move the process forward...So my judgment is that Syria will move; Syria will change, as it embraces a legitimate relationship with the United States and the West and economic opportunity that comes with it and the participation that comes with it."<sup>606</sup>
- March 27, 2011 Sec. Clinton makes comments on "Face the Nation" that Assad is a reformer, confirming Sen. Kerry's earlier portrayal of the U.S. position. Sec. Clinton received a lot of criticism for her characterization of the Middle East leader.<sup>607</sup>
- March 30, 2011 Assad delivers a speech to the Syrian parliament that puts a nail in the coffin of "Assad the Reformer."<sup>608</sup> His defiant, conspiratorial speech signals to the Obama administration that Assad may no longer be a man with whom it could negotiate.<sup>609</sup>
- April 8, 2011 Pres. Obama issues a statement condemning the violence and calling the regime to address the "legitimate aspirations" of the people.<sup>610</sup>
- April 22, 2011 Pres. Obama issues a statement condemning the violence at the hand of the regime in Hama. The White House says, "We call on President Assad to change course now, and heed the calls of his own people."<sup>611</sup>
- April 29, 2011 Pres. Obama signs Executive Order 13572 that declares the regime's "continuing escalation of violence against the people" a national emergency.<sup>612</sup> It imposes targeted sanctions on individuals and entities such as President Assad's brother Maher as well as the Iranian Revolutionary Guard

<sup>606</sup> Harriet Alexander, "John Kerry and Bashar al-Assad dined in Damascus," *The Telegraph*, September 3, 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10283045/John-Kerry-and-Bashar-al-Assad-dined-in-Damascus.html>.

<sup>607</sup> Glenn Kessler, "Hillary Clinton's incredible statement on Syria," *The Washington Post*, April 4, 2011, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/hillary-clintons-uncredible-statement-on-syria/2011/04/01/AFWPEYaC\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/hillary-clintons-uncredible-statement-on-syria/2011/04/01/AFWPEYaC_blog.html).

<sup>608</sup> Bashar al-Assad, "Syria: speech by Bashar al-Assad" (speech to the Syrian parliament, Syria, March 30, 2011), [http://www.al-bab.com/arab/docs/syria/bashar\\_assad\\_speech\\_110330.htm](http://www.al-bab.com/arab/docs/syria/bashar_assad_speech_110330.htm).

<sup>609</sup> Fred Hof, Interview

<sup>610</sup> Barack Obama, "Statement from the President on the Violence in Syria," Press Release, April 8, 2011 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/04/08/statement-president-violence-syria>.

<sup>611</sup> Schulman, "A Statement by President Obama on Syria."

<sup>612</sup> "Fact Sheet on Syria," Press Release, August 18, 2011 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/08/18/fact-sheet-syria>.

- Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF). The Dept. of Commerce revokes commercial export licenses pertaining to Syrian official VIP aircrafts. In her first official comments on the crisis, Sec. of State Clinton issues a press statement regarding the Human Rights Council's Special Session on Syria. She applauds the resolution put forth by the UNHRC that condemns human rights abuses by the regime and encourages the establishment of an urgent investigation into those abuses.<sup>613</sup>
- May 6, 2011      Sec. Clinton condemns "in the strongest terms" the repressive tactics of the Assad regime and endorses the right of the Syrian people to exercise the freedom of speech.<sup>614</sup>
- May 10, 2011      Sen. Kerry states that there is no more hope for "Assad the Reformer": "He obviously is not a reformer now...I've always said the top goal of Assad is to perpetuate his own regime."<sup>615</sup>
- May 11, 2011      Syria withdraws its candidacy for the UN Human Rights Council after aggressive U.S. lobbying to prevent its accession to the UN body.<sup>616</sup>
- May 18, 2011      Pres. Obama issues Executive Order 13573 that imposes targeted sanctions on Assad and other key Syrian officials for human rights abuses.<sup>617</sup> The Dept. of Commerce also suspends specific licenses related to Syria's Boeing 747 aircrafts.
- May 19, 2011      Pres. Obama gives his famous "Middle East Speech" in response to developments in the Arab Spring. Pres. Obama condemns Assad's violent response, realistically assessing that "President Assad now has a choice: he can lead that transition, or get out of the way."<sup>618</sup>
- May 25, 2011      George Mitchell visits Syria again to demonstrate Pres.

<sup>613</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, "The Human Rights Council's Special Session on Syria," Press Release, April 29, 2011 (online by Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/04/162260.htm>.

<sup>614</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Violence in Syria," Press Release, May 6, 2011 (online by Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/05/162843.htm>.

<sup>615</sup> Rogin, "Kerry: It's Time to Give up on Assad the Reformer."

<sup>616</sup> "Fact Sheet on Syria."

<sup>617</sup> "Fact Sheet on Syria."; Arshad Mohammed and Khaled Yacoub Oweis, "U.S. imposes sanctions on Syria's Assad," *Reuters*, May 18, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/05/18/us-syria-idUSLDE73N02P20110518>.

<sup>618</sup> Rogin, "Full Text of Obama's Middle East Speech."

- Obama's commitment to a comprehensive Middle East Peace, saying he welcomed "the full cooperation of the Syrian Arab Republic in this historic endeavor."<sup>619</sup>
- June 15, 2011 The United States and Canada draft a statement signed by 54 UN member states that addresses the deteriorating human rights situation in Syria and urges the Syrian government to allow access to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights' fact-finding mission.<sup>620</sup>
- June 20, 2011 Assad gives a speech at Damascus University, Assad blames the protests on "conspirators" and "takfiri elements" more so than on the legitimate concerns of the Syrian people.<sup>621</sup>
- July 1, 2011 Sec. Clinton says that there must be a "genuine transition to democracy" in Syria and that the "Syrian Government is running out of time" to allow for a more inclusive political process.<sup>622</sup>
- July 8, 2011 Ambassador Robert Ford makes his famous trip to Hama, where protestors view his presence as a force of protection, sure that the government would not act with him there.<sup>623</sup> The Treasury Department issues a warning to U.S. financial institutions alerting them to the potential for increased illicit financial activities involving accounts held by or on behalf of senior political figures in Syria, as a result of the unrest in Syria.<sup>624</sup>
- July 11, 2011 Sec. Clinton says that Assad has lost legitimacy and that he should not consider himself "indispensable" to Syria's future.<sup>625</sup>
- July 15, 2011 Sec. Clinton reiterates that "Assad has lost legitimacy" and that the U.S. supports a democratic transition in

<sup>619</sup> Josef Federman, "George Mitchell In Syria: Obama Determined To See "Truly Comprehensive" Mideast Peace," *Huffington Post*, August 26, 2009, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/07/26/george-mitchell-in-syria\\_n\\_245019.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/07/26/george-mitchell-in-syria_n_245019.html).

<sup>620</sup> "Fact Sheet on Syria."

<sup>621</sup> "Highlights: Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's speech on unrest," *Reuters*, June 20, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/06/20/us-syria-assad-speech-idUSTRE75J1U720110620>.

<sup>622</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Remarks on Syria," Press Release, July 1, 2011 (online by Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/07/167502.htm>.

<sup>623</sup> "Robert Ford, U.S. Ambassador To Syria, Causes Controversy With Visit To Hama," *The Huffington Post*, July 8, 2011, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/07/08/robert-ford-us-ambassador\\_n\\_893522.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/07/08/robert-ford-us-ambassador_n_893522.html).

<sup>624</sup> "Fact Sheet on Syria."

<sup>625</sup> "Clinton Says Syria's Assad 'Not Indispensable.'"

- Syria; however the future of Syria lies in the hands of Syrians themselves.<sup>626</sup>
- July 22, 2011 The State Dept. imposes travel restrictions on the Syrian Embassy in Washington, D.C., in response to Syrian efforts to restrict the movement of U.S. diplomats in Damascus. Syrian diplomats now must request permission prior to leaving Washington, D.C.<sup>627</sup>
- August 10, 2011 U.S. Treasury freezes assets of the Commercial Bank of Syria as the bank was linked to suspicious weapons deals.<sup>628</sup>
- August 12, 2011 Sec. Clinton says, "There are Syrian opposition figures outside of Syria and inside. But there's no address for the opposition. There is no place for any of us who wish to assist can go."<sup>629</sup>
- August 18, 2011 Pres. Obama asserts, "The future of Syria must be determined by its people...Assad must step aside."<sup>630</sup> Additionally, Pres. Obama issues an executive order that imposes the harshest petroleum sanctions the government had taken thus far. Targeted sanctions have been imposed on 32 Syrian and Iranian individuals.<sup>631</sup>
- August 23, 2011 Sec. Clinton congratulates the Human Rights Council for the establishment of an independent Commission of Inquiry to investigate human rights abuses in Syria. She echoes Pres. Obama's call for Assad to step aside "for the sake of the Syrian people."<sup>632</sup>
- October 5, 2011 Amb. Susan Rice storms out of a UN Security Council meeting after China and Russia exercise a double veto, the first since 2008, to turn down a resolution that would con-

<sup>626</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Remarks on Libya and Syria," Press Release, July 15, 2011 (online by Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/07/168656.htm>.

<sup>627</sup> "Fact Sheet on Syria."

<sup>628</sup> Jeff Bliss, "U.S. Treasury to Freeze Assets of Syrian Bank," *Bloomberg*, August 10, 2011, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-08-10/u-s-treasury-to-freeze-assets-of-syrian-bank.html>.

<sup>629</sup> "Hillary Clinton urges countries to cut energy, arms ties with Syria," *Al Arabiya News*, August 12, 2011, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/08/12/161919.html>.

<sup>630</sup> Barack Obama, "Statement by President Obama on the Situation in Syria," Press Release, August 18, 2011 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/08/18/statement-president-obama-situation-syria>.

<sup>631</sup> "Fact Sheet on Syria."

<sup>632</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, "The Human Rights Council's Special Session on Syria," Press Release, April 23, 2011 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/08/170949.htm>.

- demn Assad's violence in Syria.<sup>633</sup>
- October 24, 2011 U.S. withdraws Ambassador Robert Ford from Syria due to security concerns.<sup>634</sup>
- November 12, 2011 Sec. Clinton says that the Arab League's decision to suspend Syria demonstrates that "the international pressure will continue to build until the brutal Assad regime heeds the calls of its own people."<sup>635</sup>
- December 2, 2011 In a press statement, Sec. Clinton lauds the work by the Human Rights Council to further the isolation of the Syrian government and draw attention to its abuses by endorsing a report issued by the independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria.<sup>636</sup> VP Biden visits neighboring Turkey to discuss options on Syria and Iran.<sup>637</sup>
- December 6, 2011 At a meeting with the Syrian National Council in Geneva, Sec. Clinton emphasizes the importance of creating an inclusive, post-Assad Syrian government.<sup>638</sup>
- January 30, 2012 Sec. Clinton condemns the sharp escalation in regime brutality against its people and encourages the UNSC to make clear the threat that the Syrian regime poses to international peace and security.<sup>639</sup>
- January 31, 2012 Sec. Clinton speaks at the UN confirming U.S. commitment

<sup>633</sup> Daniel Miller, "They'd rather sell arms than stand with the Syrian people': U.S. envoy storms out after Russia and China veto U.N resolution," *Daily Mail*, October 5, 2011, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2045442/US-envoy-Susan-Rice-storms-Russia-China-veto-UN-resolution.html>.

<sup>634</sup> MacAskill, "US pulls ambassador Robert Ford out of Syria over security concerns."

<sup>635</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Arab League Suspends Syria," Remarks, November 12, 2011 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/11/177044.htm>.

<sup>636</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, "The Human Rights Council's Special Session on Syria," Remarks, December 2, 2011 (online by U.S. Department of State) <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/12/178137.htm>.

<sup>637</sup> Mark Landler, "In Turkey, Biden Talks About Iran and Syria," *The New York Times*, December 2, 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/03/world/middleeast/biden-confers-with-turkish-leaders-about-syria-and-iran.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/03/world/middleeast/biden-confers-with-turkish-leaders-about-syria-and-iran.html?_r=0).

<sup>638</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Remarks at Meeting with Syrian National Council," Remarks, December 6, 2011 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/12/178332.htm>.

<sup>639</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Sharp Escalation of Regime Violence in Syria," Press Release, January 30, 2012 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2012/01/182720.htm>.

- to reaching a resolution on ending the conflict in Syria and lauding the Arab League for its involvement and support.<sup>640</sup> She also calls Libya a “false analogy” for UNSC involvement.<sup>641</sup>
- February 4, 2012 Pres. Obama issues a statement commemorating the thirty-year anniversary of the Hama Massacre and condemning the ongoing violence under the Assad regime.<sup>642</sup>
- February 5, 2012 Russia and China veto a UN Security Council Resolution that would have formally condemned Assad for the violence in Syria. Amb. Susan Rice deems the double veto “outrageous” and disgusting.<sup>643</sup>
- February 8, 2012 Sens. John McCain, Lindsay Graham, and Joe Lieberman issue a statement declaring that the Obama administration should consider providing arms to the Syrian opposition.<sup>644</sup>
- February 6, 2012 U.S. Embassy in Damascus suspends operations.<sup>645</sup>
- February 24, 2012 In Tunis, at the first-ever Friend of Syrian People meeting, Sec. Clinton echoes the Arab League’s demand for a halt to violence against civilians, calls for the negotiated political solution to the crisis, and confirms U.S. commitment to the sovereignty of Syria.<sup>646</sup> She also calls Russia and China’s repeated use of the veto power in the UNSC

<sup>640</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, “Remarks Following UNSC Meeting on Syria,” Remarks, January 31, 2012 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2012/01/182848.htm>.

<sup>641</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, “Remarks at a United Nations Security Council Session on the Situation in Syria,” Remarks, January 31, 2012 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2012/01/182845.htm>.

<sup>642</sup> Barack Obama, “Statement by the President on Syria,” Press Release, February 4, 2012 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/02/04/statement-president-syria>.

<sup>643</sup> “Syria Veto ‘Outrageous’ Says U.N. Envoy Susan Rice,” *NPR*, February 5, 2012, <http://www.npr.org/2012/02/05/146424981/un-ambassador-susan-rice-fumes-at-syria-veto>.

<sup>644</sup> “Graham, McCain, Lieberman Statement on Syria.”

<sup>645</sup> Att Spetalnick and Andrew Quinn, “U.S. closes embassy in Syria, vows further pressure,” *Reuters*, February 6, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/02/06/us-syria-usa-embassy-idUSTRE81512C20120206>.

<sup>646</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, “Intervention at the Friends of Syrian People Meeting,” Press Release, February 24, 2012 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2012/02/184606.htm>.

- February 26, 2012 “despicable” when people are being murdered.<sup>647</sup>
- In an interview with CBS in Rabat, Sec. Clinton made comments backpedalling slightly on U.S. involvement in Syria, asking “I’m wondering is what about the people in Damascus, what about the people in Aleppo? Don’t they know that their fellow Syrian men, women, and children are being slaughtered by their government?...When are they going to start pulling the props out from under this illegitimate regime?” In an answer to a question as to when the threshold for violence will warrant international intervention, Sec. Clinton responded, “If you take just a moment to imagine all the terrible conflicts that go on in the world, we have seen in the last 15 years millions of people killed in the Eastern Congo in the most brutal, terrible, despicable ways. It wasn’t on TV. There were no Skype-ing from the jungles that were the killing fields. And I could point to many other places where governments oppress people, where governments are turning against their own people. And you have to be very clear-eyed about what is possible and what the consequences of anything you might wish to do could be. I am incredibly sympathetic to the calls that somebody do something. But it is also important to stop and ask what that is and who’s going to do it and how capable anybody is of doing it. And I like to get to the second, third, and fourth order questions, and those are very difficult ones.”<sup>648</sup>
- March 29, 2012 Congress passes the National Defense Authorization Act for 2013. Among other things, the act requires the Secretary of Defense to report to the defense and appropriations committees identifying the limited military activities that could deny or significantly degrade the ability of President Bashar al-Assad of Syria and forces loyal to him to use air power against civilians and opposition groups in Syria. It also requires the Secretary to report to the defense and foreign relations committees on military assistance provided to Syria by the Russian Federation. The President signs it into effect on January 2, 2013.<sup>649</sup>

<sup>647</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, “the Meeting of the Friends of the Syrian People Press Availability on the Meeting of the Friends of the Syrian People,” Press Release, February 24, 2012 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2012/02/184635.htm>.

<sup>648</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, interview by Wyatt Andrews, CBS, February 26, 2012, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2012/02/184662.htm>.

<sup>649</sup> *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2013*, HR 4310, 112<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2013, <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/112/hr4310>.

- March 23, 2012 Syrians currently residing in the U.S. are granted Temporary Protected Status by Sec. of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano.
- April 1, 2012 Friends of Syria Group meets for the second time.<sup>650</sup> Sec. Clinton makes a statement in Istanbul that the U.S. has “ratcheted up” its involvement in the crisis by introducing new sanctions on the regime, working with international partners to establish accountability measures, and increasing its humanitarian support, announcing an additional \$12 million, bringing the U.S. contribution to \$25 million.<sup>651</sup>
- April 19, 2012 Sec. Clinton makes remarks in Paris at the Ad Hoc Ministerial Meeting on Syria supporting the monitoring mission and demanding a tougher stance on Assad, suggesting a move toward Chapter 7 UN sanctions resolution.<sup>652</sup> Sec. of Defense Panetta makes a statement before the House Armed Services Committee on Syria.<sup>653</sup> He outlines first the U.S. approach to Syria then draws analogies to the intervention in Libya to demonstrate the utility of this approach.
- June 1, 2012 Sec. Clinton lauds the UN Human Rights Council’s adoption of a resolution that calls for an investigation of the massacre in Houla the week prior. She repeats the call for Assad to step aside.<sup>654</sup>
- June 6, 2012 Sec. of Treasury Tim Geithner speaks to the Friends of the Syrian People Sanctions Working Group endorsing sanctions

<sup>650</sup> “The Second Conference of the Group of Friends of the Syrian People will take place in Istanbul,” Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/the-second-conference-of-the-group-of-friends-of-the-syrian-people-will-take-place-in-istanbul.en.mfa>.

<sup>651</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, “Intervention to the Friends of the Syrian People,” Remarks, April 1, 2012 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2012/04/187295.htm>.

<sup>652</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, “Remarks at the Ad Hoc Ministerial Meeting on Syria,” Remarks, April 19, 2012 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2012/04/188147.htm>.

<sup>653</sup> Leon E. Panetta, Testimony on Syria before the House Armed Services Committee, Hearing, April 19, 2012, Available online at: <http://www.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1663>.

<sup>654</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, “The Human Rights Council’s Special Session on Syria,” Press Release, June 1, 2012 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2012/06/191673.htm>.

- and commending nations on their progress so far.<sup>655</sup> Clinton issues a press statement on behalf of Working Group that sanctions are working in putting pressure on Syrian officials for their human rights abuses.<sup>656</sup>
- June 24, 2012 Sec. Clinton reaffirms strong U.S. support for its Turkish ally after the Syrian shoot down of a Turkish plane.<sup>657</sup>
- June 30, 2012 Following a meeting of the Action Group on Syria in Geneva, Sec. Clinton announces U.S. support of Special Envoy Kofi Annan's six-point plan for a Syrian-led transition to democracy. She also makes comments regarding Russian and Chinese changes to the original document.<sup>658</sup>
- July 6, 2012 Sec. Clinton makes remarks during Friends of the Syria Ministerial Meeting in Paris lauding the Geneva meeting of the five permanent UNSC members and the Arab League in support of the transition.<sup>659</sup> Sec. Clinton also makes comments after the meeting announcing the creation of a plan for an inclusive, Syrian-led, democratic transition and recognizing the challenges of implementing it. In addition to reiterating U.S. commitment to sanctions and communication with the opposition, Sec. Clinton announces that the United States is pursuing a UNSC resolution that would impose sanctions under Chapter 7.<sup>660</sup>

<sup>655</sup> Tim Geithner, "Remarks by Secretary Tim Geithner before the Friends of the Syrian People, International Working Group on Sanctions," Press Release, June 6, 2012 (online by U.S. Department of the Treasury), <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1602.aspx>.

<sup>656</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Friends of the Syrian People Sanctions Working Group," Press Release, June 6, 2012 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2012/06/191874.htm>.

<sup>657</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Syrian Shoot-Down of Turkish Aircraft," Remarks, June 24, 2012 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2012/06/193962.htm>.

<sup>658</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Press Availability Following the Meeting of the Action Group on Syria," Remarks, June 30, 2012 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2012/06/194328.htm>.

<sup>659</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Remarks at the Friends of the Syrian People Ministerial Meeting," Remarks, July 6, 2012 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2012/07/194628.htm>; "'Friends of Syria' push for tougher sanctions," *France 24*, July 7, 2012, <http://www.france24.com/en/20120706-diplomacy-friends-syria-sanctions-transition-plan-assad-paris-usa-un-arab/>.

<sup>660</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Press Availability Following the Friends of the Syrian People Ministerial Meeting," Press Release, July 6, 2012 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2012/07/194634.htm>.

- August 2, 2012      Sec. Clinton thanks Special Envoy Kofi Annan for his service upon news of his resignation and confirms U.S. commitment to the transition framework he envisioned.<sup>661</sup>
- August 11, 2012      Sec. of State Clinton says from Istanbul that has been made clear to the Assad regime the use of chemical weapons is a “red line for the world.”<sup>662</sup> The the first use of the “red line” language by an administration official was first used in July 2012.<sup>663</sup>
- August 17, 2012      Sec. Clinton welcomes Lakhdar Brahimi’s appointment as Joint Special Representative for Syria.<sup>664</sup>
- August 20, 2012      In a press conference, Pres. Obama states, “We have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus. That would change my equation.”<sup>665</sup>
- September 13, 2012      U.S. Treasury designates Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah and other Hezbollah figures as targets for financial sanctions.<sup>666</sup>
- September 28, 2012      Sec. of Defense Leon Panetta says most caches of Syrian chemical weapons are secure, but there are a few that cannot be accounted for by U.S. intelligence.<sup>667</sup> Sec. Clin-

<sup>661</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, “Resignation of Kofi Annan as Joint Special Envoy for Syria,” Press Release, August 2, 2012 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2012/08/196017.htm>.

<sup>662</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, “Remarks on Syria: Questions and Answers Session,” Remarks, August 11, 2012 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2012/08/196394.htm>; “Hillary Clinton on Syria: use of chemical weapons is a red line – video,” *The Guardian*, August 11, 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2012/aug/11/hillary-clinton-syria-chemical-weapons-video>.

<sup>663</sup> Claudette Roulo, “Little: Syrian Chemical Weapons Appear Secure,” *Department of Defense News*, July 13, 2012, <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=117118>.

<sup>664</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, “Appointment of Lakhdar Brahimi as Joint Special Representative for Syria,” Press Release, August 17, 2012 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2012/08/196676.htm>.

<sup>665</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President to the White House Press Corps,” Press Release, August 20, 2012 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/08/20/remarks-president-white-house-press-corps>.

<sup>666</sup> Terry Atlas, “Hezbollah Chief Designated for U.S. Sanctions for Syria,” *Bloomberg*, September 13, 2012, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-09-13/hezbollah-chief-designated-for-u-s-sanctions-for-syria.html>.

<sup>667</sup> Lolita Baldor, “Syria Chemical Weapons Moved, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta Says,” *The Huffington Post*, September 28, 2012, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/28/syria-chemical-weapons-moved-panetta\\_n\\_1923159.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/28/syria-chemical-weapons-moved-panetta_n_1923159.html).

- ton makes remarks at the Ad Hoc Friends of the Syrian People Ministerial in New York in which she announces an additional \$30 million in humanitarian aid from the U.S., bringing the total U.S. contribution to \$130 million. She also announces an additional \$15 million for nonlethal aid, bringing support for the unarmed opposition to \$45 million.<sup>668</sup>
- November 11, 2012 The United States issues a press statement congratulating representatives for forming the coalition but stopped short of recognizing the Coalition as a “government in exile” despite having spearheaded efforts to unite the opposition.<sup>669</sup>
- December 3, 2012 The President again warns Assad over chemical weapons at the National Defense University: “If you make the tragic mistake of using these weapons, there where be consequences, and you will be held accountable,” Pres. Obama says.<sup>670</sup> On the same day, Sec. Clinton assures reporters that the U.S. is “planning to take action” if Assad’s regime launches a chemical attack.<sup>671</sup>
- December 11, 2012 The U.S. joins fellow members of the Friends of Syria Group at its fourth conference in Morocco in recognizing the Syrian National Coalition as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people.<sup>672</sup>
- January 29, 2013 Pres. Obama announces the delivery of \$155 million

<sup>668</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, “Remarks at the Ad Hoc Friends of the Syrian People Ministerial,” Press Release, September 28, 2012 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2012/09/198455.htm>.

<sup>669</sup> “US declares support for united Syrian opposition,” *Hurriyet Daily News*, January 5, 2015, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/us-declares-support-for-united-syrian-opposition.aspx?PageID=238&NID=34455&NewsCatID=359>; “National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces,” The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=50628>.

<sup>670</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President at the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Symposium,” Press Release, December 3, 2012 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/12/03/remarks-president-nunn-lugar-cooperative-threat-reduction-symposium>.

<sup>671</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, “Video Remarks on Syria,” Remarks, December 3, 2012 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2012/12/199997.htm>.

<sup>672</sup> “‘Friends of Syria’ recognise opposition,” *Al Jazeera*, December 12, 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/12/201212124541767116.html>; “US recognises Syria opposition coalition says Obama,” *BBC News*, December 12, 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-20690148>.

- in humanitarian aid to Syria, bringing total U.S. aid to \$365 million.<sup>673</sup>
- February 2, 2013 VP Biden calls Assad a “tyrant hell bent on clinging to power...and he must go.”<sup>674</sup>
- February 7, 2013 Sec. of Defense Leon Panetta and JCS Chairman Dempsey tell a congressional panel that they agree with preliminary plans drafted by Sec. Clinton and CIA Director Petraeus to provide arms to rebel groups.<sup>675</sup> In doing so, Sec. Panetta is the first Western senior official to publicly support arming rebels against Assad.
- February 28, 2013 Sec. Kerry makes a speech from Rome at the Friends of Syria Meeting communicating that the U.S. believes the “best solution for Syria is a political solution.”<sup>676</sup> He also announces the donation of \$60 million in nonlethal assistance.<sup>677</sup>
- April 25, 2013 U.S. and Britain demand an investigation into reports of governmental chemical weapons use.<sup>678</sup>
- April 11, 2013 In a presidential memorandum, Pres. Obama authorizes the drawdown of up to \$10 million in the resources of “any agency” at the discretion of the Sec. of State and Congress so that the money may be provided as foreign assistance to the Syrian Opposition Coalition and the Su-

<sup>673</sup> Barack Obama, “Statement by the President Announcing \$155 Million in Additional Humanitarian Assistance for the Syrian People,” Press Release, January 29, 2013 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/01/29/president-obama-announces-155-million-additional-humanitarian-aid-syrian>.

<sup>674</sup> Patrick Donahue and Jonathan Tirone, “Biden Says Syria’s Assad ‘Hellbent’ on Power, Must Go,” *Bloomberg*, February 2, 2013, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-02-01/syrian-opposition-may-seek-no-fly-zone-as-envoy-tells-un-to-lead.html>.

<sup>675</sup> Jon Swaine, “Leon Panetta supports Hillary Clinton plan to arm Syrian rebels,” *The Telegraph*, February 7, 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9856382/Leon-Panetta-supports-Hillary-Clinton-plan-to-arm-Syrian-rebels.html>.

<sup>676</sup> John Kerry, “Press Availability on Syria,” Remarks, February 28, 2013 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/02/205435.htm>; Michael Mainville and Nicolas Revise, “US set to boost support for Syria opposition,” *Middle East Online*, February 28, 2013, <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=57241>.

<sup>677</sup> John Kerry, “Remarks With Italian Foreign Minister Giulio Terzi and Syrian Opposition Council Chairman Moaz al-Khatib,” Remarks, February 28, 2013 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/02/205457.htm>.

<sup>678</sup> Michael Eisenstadt, “Investigating Alleged Chemical Weapons Use in Syria: Technical and Political Challenges,” The Washington Institute, Policywatch 2072, April 26, 2013, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/investigating-alleged-chemical-weapons-use-in-syria-technical-and-political>.

- preme Military Command.<sup>679</sup>
- April 17, 2013 Sec. Kerry issues a press statement commemorating Syria National Day and extending his sympathies for the Syrians who struggle against Assad.<sup>680</sup> Sec. Hagel speaks at the Senate Armed Services Committee hearing advocating strongly for a political solution though he notes the military has prepared contingency plans. He states, “Military intervention is always an option...but one of last resort.”<sup>681</sup>
- April 21, 2013 Sec. Kerry makes remarks with FM Ahmet Davutoğlu and Etilaf (SNC) Pres. Moaz al-Khatib after a meeting of the Friends of Syria in Istanbul laying out the opposition’s vision for Syria’s future.<sup>682</sup> Sec. Kerry outlines key concerns in Syria: “chemical weapons; the slaughter of people by ballistic missiles and other weapons of huge destruction; the potential for the whole country...breaking up into enclaves; [and the] potential of sectarian violence.”
- April 25, 2013 The White House issues a letter to Congress stating that U.S. intelligence had reports that Assad had used chemical weapons twice so far against his own people, but reports were not solid enough to warrant U.S. involvement in the conflict.<sup>683</sup> Sec. Hagel reiterates these suspicions and says that the U.S. has an “obligation to investigate.”<sup>684</sup>
- May 1, 2012 Pres. Obama issues the executive order, “Prohibiting Certain Transactions with and Suspending Entry into the United States of Foreign Sanctions Evaders with respect to Iran and

<sup>679</sup> Barack Obama, “Presidential Memorandum -- Presidential Determination on Syria Drawdown,” Memorandum for the Secretary of State, The Secretary of Defense, April 11, 2013 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/04/11/presidential-memorandum-presidential-determination-syria-drawdown>.

<sup>680</sup> John Kerry, “Syria National Day Message,” Press Release, April 17, 2013 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/04/207662.htm>.

<sup>681</sup> Chuck Hagel, Statement before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Hearing, April 17, 2013, Available online at: <http://www.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1771>.

<sup>682</sup> John Kerry, “Remarks With Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu and Syrian Opposition Coalition President Moaz al-Khatib,” Remarks, April 21, 2013 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/04/207811.htm>; Tulin Daloglu, “Friends of Syria Deliver Nothing New,” *Al Monitor’s Turkey Pulse*, April 21, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/04/syrian-opposition-radical-elements-wester-arms.html>.

<sup>683</sup> Welker, Miklaszewski, Kube and Connor, “White House: US believes Syrian regime used chemical weapons.”

<sup>684</sup> Chuck Hagel, “Statement on Syria,” Press Release, April 25, 2013 (online by U.S. Department of Defense), <http://www.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1773>.

- Syria.” This order tightens sanctions on Iran and Syria.<sup>685</sup>
- May 2, 2013      Sec. Defense Chuck Hagel confirms that the Obama administration is reconsidering arming the rebels as a legitimate policy option.<sup>686</sup>
- May 9, 2013      Sec. Kerry announces an additional \$100 million in humanitarian aid, bringing U.S. donations to \$510 million.<sup>687</sup> Sec. Hagel makes comments on Syria at the Washington Institute for Near Eastern Policy.<sup>688</sup>
- May 22, 2013      Friends of Syria Group met again today in Amman amid the escalating conflict to encourage opposition leaders to agree to meet with the regime in the Geneva II Accords.<sup>689</sup>
- June 12, 2013      U.S. Departments of State, Commerce and Treasury ease sanctions in Syrian opposition-held areas.<sup>690</sup>
- June 13, 2013      Pres. Obama authorizes providing weapons to the Syrian opposition because the administration claims it has conclusive evidence that Assad used weapons on a small scale against his own people.<sup>691</sup>
- June 17, 2013      At a G8 Summit in Northern Ireland, Pres. Obama announces an additional \$300 million in humanitarian aid,

<sup>685</sup> “Fact Sheet: New Executive Order Targeting Foreign Sanctions Evaders,” Press Release, May 1, 2012 (Online by U.S. Department of the Treasury), <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1558.aspx>.

<sup>686</sup> Lolita Baldor, “Hagel: US rethinking possibly arming rebels,” *U.S. News*, May 2, 2013, <http://www.usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2013/05/02/hagel-us-rethinking-possibly-arming-rebels>.

<sup>687</sup> Bradley Klapper and Matthew Lee, “U.S. To Provide \$100 Million In New Syria Aid For Humanitarian Purposes Only,” *The Huffington Post*, May 8, 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/05/08/us-syria-aid-humanitarian\\_n\\_3237964.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/05/08/us-syria-aid-humanitarian_n_3237964.html).

<sup>688</sup> Chuck Hagel, “Washington Institute for Near East Policy Soref Symposium,” Speech, May 9, 2013 (online by U.S. Department of Defense), <http://www.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1777>.

<sup>689</sup> “Friends of Syria meet as conflict escalates,” *The Daily Star*, May 22, 2013, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2013/May-22/217973-friends-of-syria-meet-as-conflict-escalates.ashx>.

<sup>690</sup> “Sanctions Eased for Syrian Opposition,” Media Note, June 12, 2013 (online by the U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson), <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/06/210577.htm>.

<sup>691</sup> Lee and Julie Pace, “Obama Authorizes Sending Weapons To Syrian Rebels”; “Statement by Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes on Syrian Chemical Weapons Use,” Press Release, June 13, 2013 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/06/13/statement-deputy-national-security-advisor-strategic-communications-ben->

- bringing the U.S. total to \$815 million.<sup>692</sup>
- June 22, 2013 Friends of Syria Group meets in Doha to discuss arming rebels.<sup>693</sup>
- June 26, 2013 Amb. Rice, in her last comments as U.S. ambassador to the UN, calls inaction on Syria “a stain” on the Security Council’s reputation: “The council’s inaction on Syria is a moral and strategic disgrace that history will judge harshly.”<sup>694</sup>
- August 26, 2013 Sec. Kerry makes remarks to the press condemning the attacks in Ghouta and confirming U.S. consultation with allies and consideration of policy options.<sup>695</sup>
- August 29, 2013 VP Biden demonstrated his resolve against the military option by saying that if Pres. Obama led an intervention in Syria without Congressional authorization, he would move to impeach him.<sup>696</sup>
- August 30, 2013 The Obama administration declares “with high confidence” that the Assad regime carried out the chemical attacks in Ghouta.<sup>697</sup> Sec. Kerry says that the U.S. is weighing options while it is in communication with the UN, U.S. allies, and “the American people.”<sup>698</sup>
- August 31, 2013 In a press conference, Pres. Obama publicly opts for a targeted military strike against the Assad regime in response to the chemical attack and announces that he will seek Con-

<sup>692</sup> “FACT SHEET: President Obama Increases Humanitarian Assistance to Syrians,” Press Release, June 17, 2013 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/06/17/fact-sheet-president-obama-increases-humanitarian-assistance-syrians>.

<sup>693</sup> “‘Friends of Syria’ debate arming rebels,” *Al Jazeera*, June 22, 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/06/201362263944556379.html>.

<sup>694</sup> “Susan Rice: Syria inaction a ‘stain’ on security council,” *BBC News*, June 26, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-23057745>.

<sup>695</sup> John Kerry, “Remarks on Syria,” Remarks, August 26, 2013 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/08/213503.htm>.

<sup>696</sup> Conor Friedersdorf, “Joe Biden’s Case That Waging War Without Congress Is an Impeachable Offense,” *The Atlantic*, August 29, 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/08/joe-bidens-case-that-waging-war-without-congress-is-an-impeachable-offense/279160/>.

<sup>697</sup> “Government Assessment of the Syrian Government’s Use of Chemical Weapons on August 21, 2013.”

<sup>698</sup> John Kerry, “Statement on Syria,” Press Release, August 30, 2013 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/08/213668.htm>.

- gressional authorization for the use of force.<sup>699</sup>
- September 3, 2013 following his announcement, Pres. Obama meets with Congressional leaders at the White House to discuss the use of force.<sup>700</sup> Sec. Kerry, Sec. Hagel, and Gen. Dempsey testify at the Senate Foreign Relations committee about the possible authorization of U.S. military action against the Syrian government.<sup>701</sup> Sec. Hagel comments, "A refusal to act would undermine the credibility of America's other security commitments – including the President's commitment to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. The word of the United States must mean something."<sup>702</sup>
- September 4, 2013 Pres. Obama insists that the U.S. "did not set a red line; the world set a red line."<sup>703</sup> Sec. Kerry reiterates this sentiment almost verbatim in his testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee.<sup>704</sup>
- September 6, 2013 U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations Samantha Power discussed the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons against Syrian civilians and the need for a limited military response.<sup>705</sup> Also, the president issues a joint statement on Syria with ten other nations condemning the Ghouta attack and repeating its support of non-prolifera-

<sup>699</sup> Barack Obama, "Statement by the President on Syria," Press Release, August 31, 2013 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/08/31/statement-president-syria>.

<sup>700</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President Before Meeting with Members of Congress on the Situation in Syria," Press Release, September 3, 2013 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/03/remarks-president-meeting-members-congress-situation-syria>; Megan Slacks, "President Obama Meets with Congressional Leaders on Syria," *The White House Blog*, September 3, 2013, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2013/09/03/president-obama-meets-congressional-leaders-syria>.

<sup>701</sup> "FULL TRANSCRIPT: Kerry, Hagel and Dempsey testify at Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on Syria."

<sup>702</sup> Chuck Hagel, Statement on Syria before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

<sup>703</sup> Robert, "Obama seeks global backing on Syria: 'I didn't set a red line. The world did.'"

<sup>704</sup> John Kerry, Testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, *Syria: Weighing the Obama Administration's Response*, Hearing, September 4, 2013, Available online at: <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/09/213787.htm>.

<sup>705</sup> Samantha Powers, "Remarks by Ambassador Samantha Power, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, on Syria at the Center for American Progress, Washington D.C.," Statement, September 6, 2013 (online by U.S. Mission to the United Nations), <http://usun.state.gov/briefing/statements/213901.htm>.

- tion.<sup>706</sup> By September 9th, thirty-seven more countries join in supporting the statement.<sup>707</sup> Sec. Kerry publishes an op-ed in *The Huffington Post* in which he advocates for limited military action in Syria as someone who is “informed, not imprisoned” by the military analogies of Vietnam and Iraq.<sup>708</sup>
- September 7, 2013 In his weekly address, President Obama makes the case for limited and targeted military action to hold the Assad regime accountable for its violation of international norms prohibiting the use of chemical weapons.<sup>709</sup>
- September 9, 2013 Pres. Obama continues his support for the limited military strike.<sup>710</sup> Ambassador Rice lays out the case for the damage that would be done to our national security and that of our partners and allies should we fail to respond to enforce the longstanding international norm against the use of chemical weapons.<sup>711</sup> Former Sec. of State Clinton also agrees with the President’s remarks, stating that she would “continue to support his efforts, and I hope the Congress will as well.”<sup>712</sup>
- September 10, 2013 In response to the Ghouta chemical attacks, Pres. Obama gives a speech in which he favors a Russian-brokered diplomatic solution over a military option in response for Syria

<sup>706</sup> “Joint Statement on Syria,” Press Release, September 6, 2013 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/06/joint-statement-syria>.

<sup>707</sup> “Statement on Additional Countries in Support of September 6 Joint Statement on Syria,” Press Release, September 9, 2013 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/09/statement-additional-countries-support-september-6-joint-statement-syria>.

<sup>708</sup> John Kerry, “A Yes Vote of Conscience for the World’s Red Line,” *The Huffington Post*, September 6, 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/johnkerry/syria-red-line-vote-conscience\\_b\\_3879304.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/johnkerry/syria-red-line-vote-conscience_b_3879304.html).

<sup>709</sup> Barack Obama, “Weekly Address: Calling for Limited Military Action in Syria,” Press Release, September 7, 2013 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/07/weekly-address-calling-limited-military-action-syria>.

<sup>710</sup> Alicia Oken, “Weekly Wrap Up: Syria and the G-20,” *The White House Blog*, September 6, 2013, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2013/09/06/weekly-wrap-9613-situation-syria>.

<sup>711</sup> Caitlin Hayden, “National Security Advisor Susan Rice Speaks on Syria,” *The White House Blog*, September 9, 2013, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2013/09/09/national-security-advisor-susan-rice-speaks-syria>.

<sup>712</sup> Hillary Clinton, “Former Secretary of State Clinton’s Statement on Syria,” Speech, September 9, 2013 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/photos-and-video/video/2013/09/09/former-secretary-state-clintons-statement-syria>.

- crossing the “red line.”<sup>713</sup> The President asks Congress to hold off on the vote while the first round of diplomatic engagement played out.<sup>714</sup> Sec. Kerry, Sec. Hagel, and Gen. Dempsey visit the House Armed Services Committee advocating the Geneva II process and asserting that the timeline for handing over chemical weapons “cannot be a delaying tactic.”<sup>715</sup> Sec. Hagel concurs with Sec. Kerry in his testimony before the House committee and outlines reason for U.S. action.<sup>716</sup> Sec. Kerry also gives an interview regarding U.S. options on Syria, reiterating his views from the House committee hearing.<sup>717</sup>
- September 14, 2013 In his weekly address, Pres. Obama says there is the possibility for a diplomatic solution in Syria, partially because of the “credible threat of U.S. military force.”<sup>718</sup> The White House issues a statement applauding the progress made with Russia on the agreement on the Framework for the Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons.<sup>719</sup>
- September 15, 2013 VP Biden receives criticism for using Pres. Obama’s negotiated political solution with Russia and Syrian officials as a “victory lap” for the administration in one of the U.S.’s most important caucus states.<sup>720</sup>

<sup>713</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on Syria,” Press Release, September 10, 2013 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/10/remarks-president-address-nation-syria>.

<sup>714</sup> Jeff Zeleny and Arlette Saenz, “Obama Asks Congress to Delay Vote on Syria,” *ABC News*, September 10, 2013, <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2013/09/obama-asks-congress-to-delay-vote-on-syria/>.

<sup>715</sup> John Kerry, Testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, *Proposed Authorization to Use Military Force in Syria*, Hearing, September 10, 2013, Available online at: <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/09/214028.htm>.

<sup>716</sup> Chuck Hagel, Testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, *Proposed Authorization to Use Military Force in Syria*, Hearing, September 10, 2013, Available online at: <http://www.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1803>.

<sup>717</sup> John Kerry, interview by Lara Setrakian, *Syria Deeply*, September 10, 2013, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/09/214049.htm>.

<sup>718</sup> Barack Obama, “Weekly Address: Pursuing a Diplomatic Solution in Syria,” Press Release, September 14, 2013 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/14/weekly-address-pursuing-diplomatic-solution-syria>.

<sup>719</sup> Barack Obama, “Statement by the President on U.S.-Russian Agreement on Framework for Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons,” Press Release, September 14, 2013 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/14/statement-president-us-russian-agreement-framework-elimination-syrian-ch>.

<sup>720</sup> Burns, “Joe Biden credits Obama on Syria.”

- September 19, 2013 Sec. Kerry states that the UN Sellstrom Report on Syria's chemical weapon use confirms and strengthens the U.S. report issued weeks before, emphasizing the need for international action against the Assad regime.<sup>721</sup>
- September 24, 2013 Pres. Obama announces that the U.S. will provide \$339 million in additional humanitarian aid, bringing the total aid given by this point to \$1.4 billion. Sec. Kerry holds a meeting with SNC Chairman Jarba.
- September 26, 2013 At the Friends of the Syrian People Ministerial, Sec. Kerry reiterates U.S. commitment to the diplomatic process and thanks the Syrian opposition for agreeing to participate in Geneva II.<sup>722</sup>
- September 27, 2013 UN Security Council Resolution 2118 is passed demanding that Syria remove its chemical weapons in accordance with the OPCW's framework.<sup>723</sup>
- October 22, 2013 UK FM Hague speaks on behalf of the Friends of Syria after meeting of core group in London endorsing the Geneva process and reiterating that there is no place for Assad in Syria's future.<sup>724</sup>
- October 31, 2013 In a press statement, Sec. Kerry applauds the completion of the first milestone in eliminating Syria's chemical weapons and states that the U.S. will show its continued financial and political support for the mission.<sup>725</sup>
- November 25, 2013 Sec. Kerry issues a press statement thanking Special Representative Brahimi for his agreement to participate in the Geneva talks and underscoring the importance of a diplomatic solution.<sup>726</sup>

<sup>721</sup> John Kerry, "Remarks to the Press on Syria," Press Release, September 19, 2013 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/09/214441.htm>.

<sup>722</sup> John Kerry, "Remarks at the Friends of the Syrian People Ministerial," Press Release, September 26, 2013 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/09/214830.htm>.

<sup>723</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 2118, September 27, 2013, Available online at: <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/2118>.

<sup>724</sup> William Hague, "'London 11' meeting on Syria," Press Release, October 22, 2013 (online by the U.K. Foreign & Commonwealth Office), <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/london-11-meeting-on-syria>.

<sup>725</sup> John Kerry, "Progress Eliminating Syria's Chemical Weapons Program," Press Release, October 31, 2013 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/10/216143.htm>.

<sup>726</sup> John Kerry, "Geneva Conference on Syria," Press Release, November 25, 2013 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/11/218045.htm>.

- December 11, 2013 U.S. and Britain suspend non-lethal aid after a raid on a Free Syrian Army warehouse by the Islamic Front.<sup>727</sup>
- January 23, 2014 Kerry promises protection to Syrian minorities if they abandon Assad, not by American troops but by the many other countries “who would be willing” to go there as peacekeepers.<sup>728</sup>
- January 27, 2014 Congress discretely approves light weapons to flow to “moderate” rebels.<sup>729</sup>
- January 28, 2014 News of Congress’ approval of lethal aid disrupts Geneva II talks.<sup>730</sup>
- January 30, 2014 State Dept. Spokesperson Jen Psaki accuses Syria of “dragging its feet” on the removal of chemical weapons. Sec. Hagel echoes this disenchantment with the regime, stating, “I do not know what the Syrian government’s motives are — if this is incompetence — or why they are behind in delivering these materials.”<sup>731</sup>
- January 31, 2014 Sec. Kerry warns Assad that it could face UNSC punishment for failure to comply with the chemical weapons removal framework.<sup>732</sup> “Friends of Syria,” which includes the U.S., blames the failure of Geneva II on Assad’s unwillingness to negotiate.<sup>733</sup>
- February 1, 2014 Jen Psaki denies Syrian FM al Moualem’s claim that the U.S. sought direct negotiations with the Syrian regime, circum-

<sup>727</sup> “US and UK suspend non-lethal aid for Syria rebels,” *BBC News*, December 11, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-25331241>.

<sup>728</sup> Julian Pecquet, “Kerry promises protection for Syrian minorities,” *The Hill*, January 23, 2014, <http://thehill.com/policy/international/196269-kerry-promises-protection-for-syrian-minorities>.

<sup>729</sup> Mark Hosenball, “Congress secretly approves U.S. weapons flow to ‘moderate’ Syrian rebels,” *Reuters*, January 27, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/01/27/us-usa-syria-rebels-idUSBREA0Q1S320140127>.

<sup>730</sup> Anne Barnard and Nick Cumming-Bruce, “Syrian Talks Disrupted by Congress’s Approval of Aid to Rebels,” *The New York Times*, January 28, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/29/world/middleeast/syria.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/29/world/middleeast/syria.html?_r=0).

<sup>731</sup> “U.S. accuses Syria of ‘dragging its feet’ on chemical weapons,” *Raw Story*, January 30, 2014, <http://www.rawstory.com/rs/2014/01/u-s-accuses-syria-of-dragging-its-feet-on-chemical-weapons/>.

<sup>732</sup> Paul Richter, “Kerry warns Syria of possible U.N. action over chemical arms delay,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 31, 2014, <http://www.latimes.com/world/worldnow/la-fg-wn-kerry-syria-chemical-arms-20140131-story.html>.

<sup>733</sup> Khaled Oweis, “‘Friends of Syria’ blame Assad for holding up peace talks,” *Reuters*, January 31, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/01/31/us-syria-crisis-talks-friends-idUSBREA0U18E20140131>.

- venting UN intermediaries.<sup>734</sup>
- February 4, 2014 During a hearing before the House Intelligence Committee, Mr. Clapper said that Mr. Assad had grown stronger over the past year “by virtue of his agreement to remove the chemical weapons.” This NYTimes article also notes that though Pres. Obama claimed “Assad must go” in mid-2011, this language has dropped from his recent statements.<sup>735</sup>
- February 6, 2014 U.S. Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power questions the sincerity of Assad regime’s intentions in releasing civilians trapped in Homs after UN-encouraged deal.<sup>736</sup>
- February 7, 2014 Sec. of Homeland Security Jeh Johnson says Syria becoming a greater threat to U.S. security due to threat that jihadis will return to the U.S. to launch attacks.<sup>737</sup>
- February 11, 2014 Pres. Obama reiterates that there is “no military solution in Syria” but that peace talks are stalling.<sup>738</sup>
- February 14, 2014 Given the failure of Geneva II, Pres. Obama again opens up to suggestions of policy options, but few seem forthcoming.<sup>739</sup>
- February 15, 2014 Pres. Obama threatens to “apply more pressure” to the Assad regime after Geneva talks end fruitless.<sup>740</sup>
- February 16, 2014 Sec. Kerry issues a statement blaming the stalled Geneva negotiations on the Syrian regime but ensures that the U.S.

<sup>734</sup> “U.S. denies it sought direct negotiations with Syria in Geneva,” *Reuters*, February 1, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/02/us-syria-crisis-talks-idUSBREA0T0W420140202>.

<sup>735</sup> Gordon and Mazzetti, “U.S. Spy Chief Says Assad Has Strengthened His Hold on Power.”

<sup>736</sup> Erika Solomon and Michelle Nichols, “U.N. welcomes reported Homs humanitarian deal, U.S. skeptical,” *Reuters*, February 6, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/06/us-syria-crisis-idUSBREA151E020140206>.

<sup>737</sup> “Homeland Security Secretary: Syria Conflict a Threat to U.S.,” *CBS News*, February 7, 2014, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/homeland-security-secretary-syria-conflict-a-threat-to-united-states/>.

<sup>738</sup> “Obama: Right Now No Military Solution in Syria,” News Conference, February 11, 2014 (online by Bloomberg TV), [http://www.bloomberg.com/video/obama-right-now-no-military-solution-in-syria-ojtwI5SOSdWLyb4CUgM\\_ag.html](http://www.bloomberg.com/video/obama-right-now-no-military-solution-in-syria-ojtwI5SOSdWLyb4CUgM_ag.html).

<sup>739</sup> “Kerry says Obama seeks Syria options, none presented yet,” *Reuters*, February 14, 2014, [http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/14/us-syria-crisis-usa-idUSBREA1D0NC20140214?utm\\_source=Sailthru&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=\\*Mideast%20Brief&utm\\_campaign=Mideast%20Brief%202014-2014](http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/14/us-syria-crisis-usa-idUSBREA1D0NC20140214?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_term=*Mideast%20Brief&utm_campaign=Mideast%20Brief%202014-2014).

<sup>740</sup> Richard Spencer, “Syria: Barack Obama threatens to ‘apply more pressure’ on Assad regime,” *The Telegraph*, February 15, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10640895/Syria-Barack-Obama-threatens-to-apply-more-pressure-on-Assad-regime.html>.

- remains committed to a diplomatic solution.<sup>741</sup> He also insisted that there is talks will not move forward if Assad believes he has a place in Syria's future.<sup>742</sup>
- February 17, 2014      Sec. Kerry accuses Russia and Iran of effectively undermining Syrian peace talks by stepping up military support and aid to the regime while Assad tries to "double down" on a military victory.<sup>743</sup>
- February 18, 2014      U.S. decides to reconsider options for Syria after failure of Geneva II.<sup>744</sup>
- February 20, 2014      The United States and its European and Arab allies have set up regulations that establish a unified way to provide aid to rebel groups. Categories include groups that should receive arms and other assistance, groups that are excluded due to extremist ties, and those that require further discussion.<sup>745</sup>
- February 22, 2014      UN Security Council Resolution 2139 is passed calling upon the different parties in Syria to allow greater access for humanitarian aid.<sup>746</sup>
- March 4, 2014          Pres. Obama's FY2015 budget asks Congress for \$1.5 billion dedicated to deal with the humanitarian crisis in Syria.<sup>747</sup> Undersecretary of the Treasury David Cohen releases a statement calling Kuwait, a U.S. ally, the "epicenter of fundrais-

<sup>741</sup> John Kerry, "Geneva Conference and Situation in Syria," Press Release, February 16, 2014 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/02/221702.htm>.

<sup>742</sup> "Kerry insists no place for Assad in Syria's future," *Reuters*, January 17, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/01/17/us-syria-crisis-kerry-idUSBREA0G14A20140117>.

<sup>743</sup> Simon Denyer, "Kerry says Russia and Iran undermining Syria peace talks," *The Washington Post*, February 17, 2014, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/kerry-says-russia-undermines-syria-talks/2014/02/17/c6e88386-979c-11e3-ae45-458927ccedb6\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/kerry-says-russia-undermines-syria-talks/2014/02/17/c6e88386-979c-11e3-ae45-458927ccedb6_story.html).

<sup>744</sup> Entous and Barnes, "U.S. Revisits Options on Syria as Talks Stall."

<sup>745</sup> Karen DeYoung, "U.S., allies agree on standards for which opposition groups in Syria will receive aid," *The Washington Post*, February 20, 2014, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-allies-agree-on-standards-for-which-opposition-groups-in-syria-will-receive-aid/2014/02/20/7b5b8b02-9a53-11e3-b931-0204122c514b\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-allies-agree-on-standards-for-which-opposition-groups-in-syria-will-receive-aid/2014/02/20/7b5b8b02-9a53-11e3-b931-0204122c514b_story.html).

<sup>746</sup> "Security Council Unanimously Adopts Resolution 2139 (2013) to Ease Aid Delivery to Syrians, Provide Relief from 'Chilling Darkness,'" United Nations, Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, February 22, 2014, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2014/sc11292.doc.htm>.

<sup>747</sup> Julian Pecquet, "Obama budget carves out \$1.5 billion for Syria," *The Hill*, March 4, 2014, <http://thehill.com/policy/international/199847-obama-budget-carves-out-15-billion-for-syria>.

- ing for terrorist groups in Syria.”<sup>748</sup>
- March 5, 2014 The U.S. restricts Syria’s ambassador to the UN to keep his movements to a 25-mile radius around New York.<sup>749</sup> The U.S. Ambassador to the UN Power accuses the Syrian government on “stonewalling” on the chemical removal timeline.<sup>750</sup>
- March 17, 2014 Daniel Rubenstein replaces Robert Ford as U.S. Special Envoy to Syria.<sup>751</sup>
- March 18, 2014 U.S. State Department notifies the Syrian Embassy in D.C. that it must close by the end of the month.<sup>752</sup>
- March 24, 2014 The U.S. resumes aid to the Syrian opposition after grave mismanagement of materials caused the U.S. to suspend aid.<sup>753</sup> Sec. Kerry makes remarks with OPCW Director-General Uzumcu before their meeting supporting the removal framework.<sup>754</sup>
- March 26, 2014 Whatever facade remained of a unified congressional and executive foreign policy stance was shattered in a heated debate on the floor of the Senate Foreign Rela-

<sup>748</sup> “Remarks of Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David Cohen before the Center for a New American Security on ‘Confronting New Threats in Terrorist Financing,’” March 4, 2014 (online by U.S. Department of the Treasury), <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2308.aspx>.

<sup>749</sup> “U.S. restricts movements of Syria’s U.N. envoy Ja’afari,” *Reuters*, March 5, 2014, [http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/05/us-syria-crisis-usa-un-idUSBREA2429I20140305?utm\\_source=Sailthru&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=\\*Mideast%20Brief&utm\\_campaign=Mideast%20Brief%203-6-14](http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/05/us-syria-crisis-usa-un-idUSBREA2429I20140305?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_term=*Mideast%20Brief&utm_campaign=Mideast%20Brief%203-6-14).

<sup>750</sup> Louis Charbonneau, “U.S. accuses Syria of stonewalling on chemical arms plants,” *Reuters*, March 5, 2014, [http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/06/us-syria-crisis-chemical-usa-idUSBREA2501R20140306?utm\\_source=Sailthru&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=\\*Morning%20Brief&utm\\_campaign=MB.03.06.2014](http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/06/us-syria-crisis-chemical-usa-idUSBREA2501R20140306?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_term=*Morning%20Brief&utm_campaign=MB.03.06.2014).

<sup>751</sup> Michael Gordon, “Kerry Announces U.S. Representative to Syrian Opposition,” *The New York Times*, March 17, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/18/world/middleeast/kerry-announces-us-representative-to-syrian-opposition.html?ref=middleeast&utm\\_source=Sailthru&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=\\*Mideast%20Brief&utm\\_campaign=Mideast%20Brief%203-18-14](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/18/world/middleeast/kerry-announces-us-representative-to-syrian-opposition.html?ref=middleeast&utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_term=*Mideast%20Brief&utm_campaign=Mideast%20Brief%203-18-14).

<sup>752</sup> “U.S. Relations with Syria,” Fact Sheet, U.S. Department of State, March 20, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/t/pa/ei/bgn/3580.htm>.

<sup>753</sup> Gordon Lubold, “U.S. Readies New Syria Aid,” *Foreign Policy*, March 25, 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/03/25/u-s-readies-new-syria-aid/>.

<sup>754</sup> John Kerry, “Remarks With OPCW Director-General Ahmet Uzumcu Before Their Meeting,” Press Release, March 24, 2014 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/03/223845.htm>.

- tions Committee.<sup>755</sup>
- April 1, 2014 The Senate Foreign Relations Committee approved a non-binding measure that requires the Obama administration to provide Congress with an updated humanitarian strategy for Syria within 90 days.<sup>756</sup> The House followed suit.<sup>757</sup>
- April 13, 2014 The U.S. Ambassador to UN Samantha Power states that reports regarding a new, but limited, poison gas attack have been unsubstantiated.<sup>758</sup> The claims from either side have not yet been substantiated. Nevertheless, the U.S. will do what is necessary to “establish what has happened and then consider possible steps in response.”
- April 18, 2014 Reports surface that the U.S. and Saudi Arabia have supplied Syrian rebel groups with a number of American anti-tank missiles for the first time in a pilot program.<sup>759</sup>
- April 21, 2014 U.S. cites “indications” that confirm allegations that the Syrian government used a toxic agent to attack a rebel-controlled area in Kafr Zeita, yet the reports were not yet substantiated.<sup>760</sup>
- April 28, 2014 Sec. of Homeland Security Jeh Johnson announces, “Syria has become a matter of homeland security” due to the growing threat of jihadism returning to the United States.<sup>761</sup>

<sup>755</sup> Karen DeYoung, “Senators unleash criticism of Obama administration over handling of war in Syria,” *The Washington Post*, March 26, 2014, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/senators-unleash-criticism-of-obama-administration-over-handling-of-war-in-syria/2014/03/26/dd4da610-b524-11e3-8cb6-284052554d74\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/senators-unleash-criticism-of-obama-administration-over-handling-of-war-in-syria/2014/03/26/dd4da610-b524-11e3-8cb6-284052554d74_story.html).

<sup>756</sup> Julian Pecquet, “Senate panel calls for new US strategy for Syria,” *Al Monitor’s Congress Pulse*, April 1, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/04/senate-strategy-syria-us-calls.html>.

<sup>757</sup> *Calling for an end to attacks on Syrian civilians and expanded humanitarian access*, H.Res.520, 113<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2014, <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/113/hres520/text>.

<sup>758</sup> Loveday Morris, “U.S. looks into new Syria chemical weapons attack claims,” *The Washington Post*, April 13, 2014, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/us-looks-into-new-syria-chemical-weapons-attack-claims/2014/04/13/548d898d-ef9d-48c6-b55c-6b2ec65c0a0\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/us-looks-into-new-syria-chemical-weapons-attack-claims/2014/04/13/548d898d-ef9d-48c6-b55c-6b2ec65c0a0_story.html).

<sup>759</sup> Knickmeyer, Abi-Habib and Entous, “Advanced U.S. Weapons Flow to Syrian Rebels.”

<sup>760</sup> Anne Gearan, “U.S. cites ‘indications’ toxic chemical was used in Syria attack,” *The Washington Post*, April 21, 2014, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-cites-indications-toxic-chemical-was-used-in-syria-attack/2014/04/21/78a8592c-c987-11e3-93eb-6c0037dde2ad\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-cites-indications-toxic-chemical-was-used-in-syria-attack/2014/04/21/78a8592c-c987-11e3-93eb-6c0037dde2ad_story.html).

<sup>761</sup> Susan Jones, “Jeh Johnson: ‘Syria Has Become a Matter of Homeland Security,’” *CNS News*, April 28, 2014, <http://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/susan-jones/jeh-johnson-syria-has-become-matter-homeland-security>.

- May 5, 2014 The State Department announces the delivery of an additional \$27 million in nonlethal aid. It also announces that the U.S. will allow the Syrian National Coalition to establish a foreign mission in Washington D.C. However, members do not receive diplomatic immunity and do not replace the Syrian embassy.<sup>762</sup>
- May 7, 2014 Pres. Obama notifies Congress of the extension of the state of national emergency with respect to Syria beyond May 11, 2014.<sup>763</sup>
- May 8, 2014 Sec. Kerry welcomes SNC President Jarba to the U.S. for meetings with White House and Congress.<sup>764</sup> Department of Treasury increases sanctions on Russian bank Tempbank as well as Syrian government officials and refineries like Baniyas Refinery Co. and Homs Refinery Co.<sup>765</sup>
- May 12, 2014 Sec. Kerry told members of the Syrian opposition in a private meeting that the U.S. “wasted a year” by not working together as the international community to defeat Assad.<sup>766</sup>
- May 14, 2014 Pres. Obama and NSA Rice meet with SNC Pres. Jarba as a show of support for the opposition, especially amid concerns that lethal weapons may make it into the wrong hands.<sup>767</sup> The Treasury Department announces sanctions against two “specially designated global terrorists” in Syr-

<sup>762</sup> “Syrian opposition will have foreign mission in US,” *BBC News*, May 5, 2014, [http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-27287650?utm\\_source=Sailthru&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=\\*Morning%20Brief&utm\\_campaign=MB%20050614](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-27287650?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_term=*Morning%20Brief&utm_campaign=MB%20050614).

<sup>763</sup> “Message to the Congress -- Continuation of the National Emergency with respect to Syria,” Press Release, May 7, 2014 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/07/message-congress-continuation-national-emergency-respect-syria>.

<sup>764</sup> John Kerry, “Remarks With Syrian Opposition Coalition President Ahmad al-Jarba Before Their Meeting,” Remarks, May 8, 2014 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/05/225781.htm>.

<sup>765</sup> “Treasury Sanctions Syrian Regime Officials and Supporters,” Press Release, May 8, 2014 (online by the U.S. Department of the Treasury, Press Center), <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2391.aspx>.

<sup>766</sup> Josh Rogin, “Exclusive: Kerry Told Syrian Rebels ‘We Wasted a Year’ in Fight Against Assad,” *The Daily Beast*, May 12, 2014, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/05/12/exclusive-kerry-told-syrian-rebels-we-wasted-a-year-in-fight-against-assad.html>.

<sup>767</sup> “Obama meets Syria opposition leader Jarba,” *Al Jazeera*, May 14, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/05/obama-meets-syria-opposition-leader-jarba-201451491026774741.html>.

- ia for their support of al-Qaeda.<sup>768</sup>
- May 15, 2014 Rebels stated that the Southern Front strategy suggested by the U.S. government has failed. The Friends of Syria group meets for the first time since January and condemns Assad's "parody" of elections. Kerry states, "We have to redouble our efforts, all of us, in support of the moderate opposition in order to bring about a peaceful resolution that the people of Syria want."<sup>769</sup>
- May 22, 2014 China and Russia veto a UN Security Council Resolution that would make Assad stand trial before the International Criminal Court.<sup>770</sup> Amb. Samantha Power responds, "The Syrian people will not see justice today. They will see crime, but not punishment. The vetoes today have prevented the victims of atrocities from testifying at the Hague."
- May 28, 2014 Pres. Obama announces in his West Point Speech he will give the Syrian opposition greater aid as well as give Syrian people more humanitarian assistance.<sup>771</sup>
- June 3, 2014 Robert Ford announced he quit his position as U.S. ambassador to Syria because he could no longer support the Obama administration's policy on Syria.<sup>772</sup>
- June 4, 2014 While in Lebanon, Secretary Kerry called the elections that extended Bashar al-Assad's rule by seven years a 'great big zero.' He said that the 'elections were non-elections' and that

<sup>768</sup> "Treasury Designates Al-Qa'ida Leaders In Syria," Press Release, May 14, 2014 (online by the U.S. Department of the Treasury, Press Center), <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2396.aspx>.

<sup>769</sup> "'Friends of Syria' vow to boost aid to opposition rebels," *France 24*, May 15, 2014, <http://www.france24.com/en/20140515-friends-syria-vow-boost-aid-opposition-rebels-london-usa-uk-assad/>.

<sup>770</sup> Ian Black, "Russia and China veto UN move to refer Syria to international criminal court," *The Guardian*, May 22, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/22/russia-china-veto-un-draft-resolution-refer-syria-international-criminal-court>.

<sup>771</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President at the United States Military Academy Commencement Ceremony," Press Release, May 28, 2014 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/28/remarks-president-west-point-academy-commencement-ceremony>.

<sup>772</sup> Mick Krever, "Former U.S. Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford: I could no longer 'defend the American policy,'" *Amanpour* (blog), June 3, 2014 (10:48 a.m.), <http://amanpour.blogs.cnn.com/2014/06/03/former-u-s-ambassador-to-syria-i-could-no-longer-defend-the-american-policy-robert-ford/>.

- they would have no bearing on U.S. foreign policy.<sup>773</sup> He announced on his trip to Lebanon that the United States would commit an additional \$290 million in humanitarian aid, which brings total U.S. contributions to \$2 billion.<sup>774</sup>
- June 19, 2014 President Obama gives a speech in which he pins the inefficacy of U.S. policy on the underwhelming military capability of the opposition: "And so we have consistently provided that opposition with support. Oftentimes, the challenge is if you have former farmers or teachers or pharmacists who now are taking up opposition against a battle-hardened regime, with support from external actors that have a lot at stake, how quickly can you get them trained; how effective are you able to mobilize them. And that continues to be a challenge."<sup>775</sup> Yet many in the policy field call this an excuse for U.S. inaction, stating that the majority of the opposition has actually received military training through conscription demands.<sup>776</sup>
- June 22, 2014 Pres. Obama said that the notion that a US.-backed moderate Syrian rebel force could have stopped Bashar al-Assad and ISIS is a "fantasy."<sup>777</sup>
- June 23, 2014 Sec. Kerry issues a statement lauding the international community for its efforts to eliminate Syria's chemical weapons, which it completed as of this day. Sec. Kerry notes, however, that "our work is not finished" and that more must be done to deal with the use of chlorine in opposition areas, to destroy production facilities, and to address the humanitarian crisis.<sup>778</sup>
- June 25, 2014 Sec. Kerry issues a warning after Syrian warplanes strike at ISIS combatants in Iraq. He says, "We've made it clear to everyone in the region that we don't need anything to take

<sup>773</sup> Liz Sly, "Kerry calls Syria election a 'great big zero,'" *The Washington Post*, June 4, 2014, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/kerry-calls-syria-election-a-great-big-zero/2014/06/04/652a9b93-bc29-4f1a-b701-4e614e98c36a\\_story.html?wprss=rss\\_world](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/kerry-calls-syria-election-a-great-big-zero/2014/06/04/652a9b93-bc29-4f1a-b701-4e614e98c36a_story.html?wprss=rss_world).

<sup>774</sup> John Kerry, "Press Availability in Beirut, Lebanon," Press Release, June 4, 2014 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/06/227100.htm>.

<sup>775</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President on the Situation in Iraq," Press Release, June 19, 2014 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/06/19/remarks-president-situation-iraq>.

<sup>776</sup> Glenn Kessler, "Are Syrian opposition fighters 'former farmers or teachers or pharmacists?'"

<sup>777</sup> Talev and Keane, "Obama Says Quickly Arming Syrian Opposition a 'Fantasy.'"

<sup>778</sup> John Kerry, "Removal of Declared Chemical Materials from Syria," Press Release, June 23, 2014 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/06/228302.htm>.

- place that might exacerbate sectarian divisions that are already at a heightened level of tension,"<sup>779</sup>
- June 26, 2014 Pres. Obama asks Congress for \$500 million to directly train & equip the moderate Syrian opposition; operations would be led by the Department of Defense and will expand a CIA program already in place.<sup>780</sup>
- June 27, 2014 Sec. Kerry meets with King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia and Ahmad Jarba to discuss what can be done in Syria to stymie ISIS's advance by cooperating with the moderate opposition.<sup>781</sup>
- June 5, 2014 The White House releases the Brussels G7 Summit Declaration, strongly condemning the brutality exhibited by the Assad regime. The declaration, formed by the leaders of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, U.K., E.U., and Pres. Obama also denounces the recently held presidential elections in Syria, saying, "There is no future for Assad in Syria."
- June 10, 2014 ISIS militants take control of Iraq's second largest city, Mosul, after forcing out Iraqi security forces. Iraqi PM Nouri al-Maliki declares a state of national state of emergency. It has been two and a half years since the U.S. pulled troops out of Iraq.<sup>782</sup> The State Department issues a statement condemning ISIS's takeover of Mosul. Department spokesperson Psaki says, "The situation remains extremely serious."<sup>783</sup>
- June 11, 2014 The White House releases a statement strongly condemning the recent attacks in Iraq by ISIS, saying "The United States will stand with Iraqi leaders across the political spectrum as they forge the national unity necessary to succeed

<sup>779</sup> "Kerry Warns Mideast Nations After Syria Bombs Iraq," *CBS News*, June 25, 2014, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/u-s-syria-may-have-launched-airstrikes-in-iraq/>.

<sup>780</sup> Karen DeYoung, "Obama asks for authorization to provide direct military training to Syrian rebels," *The Washington Post*, June 26, 2014, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-backs-us-military-training-for-syrian-rebels/2014/06/26/ead59104-fd62-11e3-932c-0a55b81f48ce\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-backs-us-military-training-for-syrian-rebels/2014/06/26/ead59104-fd62-11e3-932c-0a55b81f48ce_story.html).

<sup>781</sup> Ahmed Al Omran and Ellen Knickmeyer, "John Kerry Meets With Saudi King Abdullah, Syrian Opposition Leader Jarba," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 27, 2014.

<sup>782</sup> Ziad al-Sinjary, "Mosul falls to militants, Iraqi forces flee northern city," *Reuters*, June 11, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-security-idUSKBN0EL1H520140611>.

<sup>783</sup> "U.S. Condemns ISIL Assault on Mosul," Press Release, June 10, 2014 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/06/227378.htm>.

- in the fight against ISIL.”<sup>784</sup>
- June 13, 2014 UN Amb. Power travels to Turkey to visits refugee camps in the southeast. Addressing the press from Gaziantep, she says that halting the atrocities in Syria perpetrated by the Assad regime is a “top priority” for Washington.”<sup>785</sup>
- June 23, 2014 The final eight percent of chemical weapons in Syria are declared to have been removed from the country. Amb. Power states, “This represents a significant step. We must also resolve discrepancies and omissions related to the Syrian government’s declaration of its chemical weapons program, and we must ensure the destruction of all of Syria’s chemical weapons production facilities.”<sup>786</sup>
- June 26, 2014 President Obama requests \$500 million from Congress to train & equip what the White House calls “appropriately vetted” members of the Syrian opposition, reflecting increased worry about the spillover of the Syrian conflict into Iraq. However, the request comes without any specific development of what such a program would look like.<sup>787</sup>
- June 27, 2014 Sec. Kerry meets with Syrian Opposition Coalition President Ahmad al-Jarba. After the meeting the Secretary remarks, “Obviously in light of what has happened in Iraq, we have even more to talk about in terms of the moderate opposition in Syria, which has the ability to be a very important player in pushing back against ISIL’s presence.”<sup>788</sup>
- July 30, 2014 During a press statement, Sec. State Kerry remarks, “The world must act quickly and decisively to get life-saving assistance to

<sup>784</sup> “Statement by the Press Secretary on Iraq,” Press Release, June 11, 2014 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/06/11/statement-press-secretary-iraq>.

<sup>785</sup> Samantha Power, “Remarks to the Press by Ambassador Samantha Power, U. S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, in Gaziantep, Turkey,” Remarks, June 13, 2014 (online by the United States Mission to the United Nations), <http://usun.state.gov/remarks/6085>.

<sup>786</sup> Samantha Power, “Statement by Ambassador Samantha Power, on the Removal of Chemical Weapons Materials from Syria,” Statement, June 23, 2014 (online by the United States Mission to the United Nations), <http://usun.state.gov/remarks/6093>.

<sup>787</sup> Helene Cooper, “Obama Requests Money to Train ‘Appropriately Vetted’ Syrian Rebels,” *The New York Times*, June 26, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/27/world/middleeast/obama-seeks-500-million-to-train-and-equip-syrian-opposition.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/27/world/middleeast/obama-seeks-500-million-to-train-and-equip-syrian-opposition.html?_r=0).

<sup>788</sup> John Kerry, “Remarks With Syrian Opposition Coalition President Ahmad al-Jarba During Their Meeting,” Remarks, June 27, 2014 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/06/228534.htm>.

- the innocent civilians who are bearing the brunt of this barbaric war. That's why the United States is providing nearly \$378 million in additional aid to help those battered by conflict."<sup>789</sup>
- August 7, 2014 At the behest of the Iraqi government, Pres. Obama authorizes targeted airstrikes to protect American personnel and humanitarian airdrops of food and water to Iraqi civilians trapped in the mountains by ISIS offensive movements.<sup>790</sup>
- August 15, 2014 The UNSC adopts Resolution 2170 on ISIL and the al-Nusra Front in Iraq and Syria.<sup>791</sup>
- August 18, 2014 Pres. Obama releases a statement regarding the destruction of chemical weapons from Syria, saying, "The most lethal declared chemical weapons possessed by the Syrian regime were destroyed by dedicated U.S. civilian and military professionals."<sup>792</sup>
- August 20, 2014 News breaks that ISIS beheads American journalist James Foley, who disappeared in northern Syria in November 2012. National Security Council spokeswoman Caitlin Hayden says, "We have seen a video that purports to be the murder of U.S. citizen James Foley by (ISIS)...The intelligence community is working as quickly as possible to determine its authenticity."<sup>793</sup> Later in the evening, Pres. Obama delivers an address to the nation on Foley's murder, saying, "When people harm Americans, anywhere, we do what's necessary to see that justice is done... And we will continue to confront this hateful terrorism, and replace it with a sense of hope and civility. And that's what Jim Foley stood for, a man who lived his work; who courageously told the stories of his fellow human beings; who was liked and loved by friends and fami-

<sup>789</sup> John Kerry, "The United States Contributes \$378 Million in Additional Funding to Syria," Press Statement, July 30, 2014 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/07/229967.htm>.

<sup>790</sup> Barack Obama, "Statement by the President," Statement, August 7, 2014 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/07/statement-president/>

<sup>791</sup> "Security Council Adopts Resolution 2170 (2014) Condemning Gross, Widespread Abuse of Human Rights by Extremist Groups in Iraq, Syria," Meetings Coverage, August 15, 2014 (online by the United Nations), <http://www.un.org/press/en/2014/sc11520.doc.htm>.

<sup>792</sup> Barack Obama, "Statement by the President on the Completion by the M/V Cape Ray of the Destruction of Syria's Declared Chemical Weapons," Statement, August 18, 2014 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/18/statement-president-completion-mv-cape-ray-destruction-syria-s-declared->

<sup>793</sup> Chelsea Carter, "Video shows ISIS beheading U.S. journalist James Foley," *CNN*, August 20, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/08/19/world/meast/isis-james-foley/>.

- ly.<sup>794</sup> Sec. Kerry also releases a statement honoring Foley and reiterating U.S. commitment to defeating ISIS.<sup>795</sup>
- August 21, 2014 While speaking to the press, Sec. Hagel claims ISIS advancements in Syria are, “beyond anything that we have seen,” continuing, “We must prepare for everything. And the only way you do that is that you take a cold, steely, hard look at it... and get ready.” Hagel later claims he received push back from the administration for overstating ISIS advancement.<sup>796</sup>
- August 28, 2014 Pres. Obama discusses Syria during a press briefing gives a press. He says, “Assad has lost legitimacy in terms of dropping barrel bombs on innocent families and killing tens of thousands of people. And right now, what we’re seeing is the areas that ISIL is occupying are not controlled by Assad anyway. And, frankly, Assad doesn’t seem to have the capability or reach to get into those areas.”<sup>797</sup>
- September 3, 2014 Pres. Obama condemns ISIS’s execution of Steven Sotloff, an American citizen, saying the act “only strengthened the U.S.’ resolve “to take the fight against these terrorists.” He vows to punish the Sunni militants whose videotaped beheadings of two American journalists he said had “repulsed” the world.<sup>798</sup>
- September 4, 2014 Pres. Obama and UK PM David Cameron pen a joint op-ed, published in the Times of London. In the text, the two leaders call for NATO to become a “more effective security network that fosters stability around the world,” and confront ISIS.<sup>799</sup>

<sup>794</sup> Barack Obama, “President Obama Delivers a Statement on the Murder of James Foley,” Video, August 20, 2014 (online by the White House), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/photos-and-video/video/2014/08/20/president-obama-delivers-statement-murder-james-foley#transcript>.

<sup>795</sup> John Kerry, “Murder of James Foley,” Statement, August 20, 2014 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/08/230772.htm>.

<sup>796</sup> Dan de Luce, “Hagel: The White House Tried to Destroy Me,” *Foreign Policy*, December 18, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/12/18/hagel-the-white-house-tried-to-destroy-me/>.

<sup>797</sup> Barack Obama, “Statement by the President,” Statement, August 28, 2014 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/28/statement-president>.

<sup>798</sup> Julie Hirschfeld Davis, “After Beheading of Steven Sotloff, Obama Pledges to Punish ISIS,” *The New York Times*, September 3, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/04/world/middleeast/steven-sotloff-isis-execution.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/04/world/middleeast/steven-sotloff-isis-execution.html?_r=0).

<sup>799</sup> David Cameron and Barack Obama, “Strengthening the NATO alliance: article by David Cameron and Barack Obama,” Article, September 4, 2014 (Online by Prime Minister’s Office), <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/strengthening-the-nato-alliance-article-by-david-cameron-and-barack-obama>.

- September 5, 2014 During remarks delivered during the Wales NATO Summit, Pres. Obama says that the U.S., “will not be placing U.S. ground troops to try to control the areas that are part of the conflict inside of Syria.”<sup>800</sup>
- September 5, 2014 Sec. Hagel holds a joint meeting with Sec. Kerry with key allies in the fight against ISIS. The meeting focused on the fight against ISIL in Iraq, and creation of a multinational task force to share more information about the flow of foreign fighters into Syria and from Syria into Iraq.<sup>801</sup>
- September 8, 2014 Sec. Hagel meets with Turkish leaders, including President Erdogan, in Ankara to discuss Turkey’s role in the fight against ISIL. Hagel says, “Today’s meetings were a reaffirmation, clearly, of Turkey’s commitment to be part of this effort, to destroy ISIL and everything that ISIL represents.”<sup>802</sup>
- September 10, 2014 In national speech, Pres. Obama outlines his strategy for defeating ISIS in four major points: a comprehensive campaign of airstrikes, increased support of forces on the ground fighting ISIL, specifically Iraqi forces; counterterrorism strategies, including cutting funding and stemming the flow of foreign fighters; and humanitarian assistance to civilians displaced by the conflict. Pres. Obama announces a drastic expansion of U.S. action in Syria, including airstrikes in Syria and the deployment of an additional 475 military advisors to Iraq.<sup>803</sup>
- September 11, 2014 In a press briefing, White House Press Secretary John Earnest says that the, “President has indicated that he is ready to order military action in Syria, predicated on what he described as a core principle of his presidency, which is to deny a safe haven to those individuals who would seek to do harm

<sup>800</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by President Obama at NATO Summit Press Conference,” Remarks, September 5, 2014 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/05/remarks-president-obama-nato-summit-press-conference>.

<sup>801</sup> Chuck Hagel, “Joint Statement by Secretary Kerry and Secretary Hagel on the ISIL Meeting,” News Release, September 5, 2014 (online by U.S. Department of Defense), <http://www.defense.gov/News/News-Releases/News-Release-View/Article/605170/joint-statement-by-secretary-kerry-and-secretary-hagel-on-the-isil-meeting>.

<sup>802</sup> Phil Stewart, “Turkey to play role in fight against Islamic State,” *Reuters*, September 8, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-crisis-usa-turkey-idUSKBN0H312B20140908>.

<sup>803</sup> Barack Obama, “In Speech on ISIS Promises Sustained Effort to Rout Militants,” *The New York Times*, September 10, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/11/world/middleeast/obama-speech-isis.html>.

- to the United States of America.”<sup>804</sup>
- September 13, 2014 During his weekly address to the nation, Pres. Obama announces that additional nations are joining the anti-ISIS coalition. “This week, Arab nations agreed to strengthen their support for the new Iraqi government and to do their part in the fight against ISIL, including aspects of the military campaign. Saudi Arabia will join the effort to help train & equip moderate Syrian opposition forces, he says.”<sup>805</sup>
- September 16, 2014 Congress passes and Pres. Obama signs the Continuing Appropriations Resolution to arm and train “appropriately vetted elements of the Syrian opposition and other appropriately vetted Syrian groups.” The program is estimated to cost the U.S. government \$500 million.<sup>806</sup>
- September 17, 2014 Pres. Obama reiterates, during a speech at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, that he will not send troops to Syria or Iraq. Later, Sec. State Kerry reiterates the position that the U.S. will not send ground troops into combat.<sup>807</sup>
- September 17, 2014 Pres. Obama releases a statement regarding the House of Representatives’ vote to approve the program to train the Syrian Opposition. He says, “Today’s vote is another step closer to having the authorization to train & equip vetted elements of the moderate Syrian opposition so they can defend themselves against, and ultimately push back on, ISIL forces in Syria, while creating the conditions for the political solution necessary to solve Syria’s crisis once and for all. This training program will be conducted outside of Syria, in partnership with regional countries. There will be no U.S.

<sup>804</sup>John Earnest, “Press Briefing by Press Secretary”, September 11, 2014 (online by White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/11/press-briefing-press-secretary-josh-earnest-9112014>

<sup>805</sup>Barack Obama, “Weekly Address: We Will Degrade and Destroy ISIL,” Video, September 13, 2014 (online by the White House), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/photos-and-video/video/2014/09/13/weekly-address-we-will-degrade-and-destroy-isil#transcript>.

<sup>806</sup>“TRANSCRIPT: Dempsey testifies to the Senate Armed Services Committee on the Islamic State,” *The Washington Post*, September 16, 2014, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/transcript-dempsey-testifies-to-the-senate-armed-services-committee-on-the-islamic-state/2014/09/16/a65b6aea-3da3-11e4-b0ea-8141703bbf6f\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/transcript-dempsey-testifies-to-the-senate-armed-services-committee-on-the-islamic-state/2014/09/16/a65b6aea-3da3-11e4-b0ea-8141703bbf6f_story.html).

<sup>807</sup>Michael D. Shear and Michael R. Gordon, “Obama Promises Again Not to Send Ground Troops to Fight Militants,” *The New York Times*, September 17, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/18/us/politics/obama-promises-again-not-to-send-ground-troops-to-fight-militants.html>.

- military personnel in Syria as part of this program.”<sup>808</sup>
- September 17, 2014      Sec. Kerry testifies before Senate Foreign Relations Committee on the U.S. strategy to defeat ISIL. He outlines the administration’s strategy as having two pillars, saying, “At its core, our strategy is centered on a global coalition that will collaborate closely across a number of specific areas, including direct and indirect military support. The U.S. troops that have been deployed to Iraq do not and will not have a combat mission. Instead, they will support Iraqi forces on the ground as they fight for their country against these terrorists. And in Syria, the on-the-ground combat will be done by the moderate opposition, which serves as the current best counterweight in Syria to extremists like ISIL. We know that ISIL – as it gets weaker, the moderate opposition will get stronger.”<sup>809</sup>
- September 22, 2014      The U.S., in partnership with Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates, launches its first airstrikes against the ISIS forces in Syria.<sup>810</sup>
- September 23, 2014      Pres. Obama speaks from the South Lawn, announcing that he has ordered American armed forces to begin targeted airstrikes against ISIS targets in Syria.<sup>811</sup>
- September 24, 2014      Pres. Obama addresses the U.N. Security Council Summit on Foreign Terrorist Fighters after the council unanimously adopts Resolution 2178 (2014) condemning violent extremism and underscoring the need to prevent travel and

<sup>808</sup> Barack Obama, “Statement by the President on the House of Representatives Vote to Authorize the Title X Train and Equip Program for the Moderate Syrian Opposition,” Statement, September 17, 2014 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/17/statement-president-house-representatives-vote-authorize-title-x-train-a>.

<sup>809</sup> John Kerry, “Opening Remarks on the United States Strategy To Defeat the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant,” Testimony, September 17, 2014 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/09/231773.htm>

<sup>810</sup> “Sept. 23: U.S. Military, Partner Nations Conduct Airstrikes Against ISIL in Syria,” News Release, September 23, 2014 (online by United States Central Command), <http://www.centcom.mil/en/news/articles/sept.-23-u.s.-military-partner-nations-conduct-airstrikes-against-isil-in-s>.

<sup>811</sup> Barack Obama, “Statement by the President on Airstrikes in Syria,” Statement, September 23, 2014 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/23/statement-president-airstrikes-syria>.

- support for foreign terrorist fighters.<sup>812</sup>
- September 24, 2014 Pres. Obama addresses the U.N. General Assembly, discussing ISIS, Syria, and Islamic extremism. “Together with our partners, America is training and equipping the Syrian opposition to be a counterweight to the terrorists of ISIL and the brutality of the Assad regime. But the only lasting solution to Syria’s civil war is political -- an inclusive political transition that responds to the legitimate aspirations of all Syrian citizens, regardless of ethnicity, regardless of creed. I can promise you America will remain engaged in the region, and we are prepared to engage in that effort.”<sup>813</sup>
- September 24, 2014 Speaking at UN headquarters, Sec. Kerry states, “Let me make it clear to all those who are part of that effort that for all of the men and women who make up the moderate Syrian opposition, we stand behind you today. We have stood behind you in these last years. I know sometimes there’s been a greater desire for more, but we will continue to stand beside you as long as ISIL remains a threat and Assad remains in power., as well.”<sup>814</sup>
- September 26, 2014 Hagel speaks at a joint press conference with General Dempsey. He discusses the U.S. strategy with ISIL with regards to Assad: “In Syria there has been no coordination, nor will there be with the Assad regime. Nothing has changed about our position that has shifted our approach to Assad and his regime because this regime, President Assad, has lost all legitimacy to govern.”<sup>815</sup>
- September 27, 2014 The Pentagon announces the first U.S. airstrikes against ISIS near the Syrian city of Kobani, a Kurdish city near

<sup>812</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President at U.N. Security Council Summit on Foreign Terrorist Fighters,” Remarks, September 24, 2014 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/24/remarks-president-un-security-council-summit-foreign-terrorist-fighters>.

<sup>813</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by President Obama in Address to the United Nations General Assembly,” Remarks, September 24, 2014 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/24/remarks-president-obama-address-united-nations-general-assembly>.

<sup>814</sup> John Kerry, “Remarks at Syria Ministerial,” Remarks, September 24, 2014 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/09/232086.htm>.

<sup>815</sup> Chuck Hagel, “Department of Defense Press Briefing by Secretary Hagel and Gen. Dempsey in the Pentagon Briefing Room,” News Transcript, September 26, 2014 (online by U.S. Department of Defense), <http://www.defense.gov/News/News-Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/606934/departments-of-defense-press-briefing-by-secretary-hagel-and-gen-dempsey-in-the>.

- the Turkish border.<sup>816</sup>
- September 28, 2014 In an interview with 60 minutes, Pres. Obama acknowledges that he underestimated the rapid rise of ISIS.<sup>817</sup>
- October 7, 2014 The New York Times reports on Turkish inaction in Kobani has disappointed the Obama administration. Pres. Obama would like to see Turkey take stronger action against the Islamic State in Kobani, but President Erdogan says Turkey will not get more deeply involved in the conflict.
- October 9, 2014 Special Pres. Envoy Allen and Dept. Special Pres. Envoy McCurk travel to Turkey to meet with Turkish officials, including PM Davutoglu. They discuss areas where the two allies are able to cooperate in against ISIS.<sup>818</sup>
- October 14, 2014 Sec. State Kerry announces that the U.S. and Russia have reached an intelligence sharing agreement on ISIS.<sup>819</sup>
- October 20, 2014 Pres. Obama's Dep. National Security Advisor Rhodes speaks with CNN about the fight in Kobani. He says that U.S. forces have air dropped arms, medical supplies, and food provided by Iraqi Kurds to Kobani.<sup>820</sup>
- November 7, 2014 Pres. Obama authorizes the deployment of an additional 1,500 American troops to Iraq, doubling the number of Americans deployed to train and advise Kurdish and Iraqi forces. The new personnel are authorized to operate at Iraqi bases outside those traditionally used by U.S. forces.<sup>821</sup>
- November 13, 2014 Sec. Hagel testifies before the House Armed Services Com-

<sup>816</sup> David Sanger and Anne Barnard, "U.S., Defending Kurds in Syria, Expands Airstrikes Against Islamic State Militants," *The New York Times*, September 27, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/28/world/middleeast/us-strikes-isis-in-syria-to-defend-kurds.html>.

<sup>817</sup> Peter Baker and Brian Knowlton, "Obama Acknowledges U.S. Erred in Assessing ISIS," *The New York Times*, September 28, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/29/world/middleeast/president-obama.html>.

<sup>818</sup> "Special Presidential Envoy John Allen Meetings With Turkish Officials on Efforts to Counter ISIL," Press Statement, October 9, 2014 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/10/232819.htm>.

<sup>819</sup> Michael R. Gordon, "U.S. and Russia Agree to Share More Intelligence on ISIS," *The New York Times*, October 14, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/15/world/europe/us-and-russia-agree-to-share-more-intelligence-on-isis.html>.

<sup>820</sup> Ben Rhodes, "The Situation Room," *CNN*, October 20, 2014, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1410/20/sitroom.01.html>.

<sup>821</sup> Helene Cooper and Michael D. Shear, "Obama to send 1,500 More Troops to Assist Iraq," *The New York Times*, November 7, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/08/world/middleeast/us-to-send-1500-more-troops-to-iraq.html>.

- mittee that though ISIS has been degraded in some parts of Iraq, it “will not be defeated through military force alone.” He cites the lack of a partner government in Syria to work with and emphasizes that military strategy will demand time, patience and perseverance to deliver results.<sup>822</sup>
- November 16, 2014 In a press conference at the Brisbane G-20 Summit, Pres. Obama maintains that the U.S. policy and attitude that “As-sad must go” remains unchanged.<sup>823</sup>
- November 22, 2014 VP Biden announces that the U.S. will provide \$135 million in additional humanitarian assistance to Syria.<sup>824</sup>
- December 14, 2014 Sec. Kerry and Russian FM Lavrov meet in Rome for talks on the Middle East. The meeting focused on Israel and Palestine, but discussion also includes tensions over Syria and Ukraine. The event ends without a news conference.<sup>825</sup>
- January 16, 2015 The Pentagon officially announces that the U.S. will begin to train & equip “moderate” Syrian rebels to fight against ISIS. The military plans to deploy 400 trainers and hundreds more troops to assist in this mission. Training will be conducted at sites in Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar.<sup>826</sup>
- January 20, 2015 During his State of the Union Address, Pres. Obama calls upon Congress to pass a resolution authorizing the use of force against ISIS.<sup>827</sup>

<sup>822</sup> Jake Richmond, “Hagel: ISIL Degraded But Remains Dangerous,” *DoD News*, November 13, 2014, <http://www.defense.gov/News-Article-View/Article/603644/hagel-isil-degraded-but-remains-dangerous>.

<sup>823</sup> Barack Obama, Remarks by President Obama at G20 Press Conference | November 16, 2014,” Remarks, November 16, 2014 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/11/16/remarks-president-obama-g20-press-conference-november-16-2014>.

<sup>824</sup> “FACT SHEET: Vice President Joe Biden Announces \$135 Million in Additional Humanitarian Assistance for Syria Crisis,” Release, November 22, 2014 (online by the White House Office of the Vice President), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/11/22/fact-sheet-vice-president-joe-biden-announces-135-million-additional-hum>.

<sup>825</sup> Steven Erlanger, “Kerry Piles On Miles, Pressing for a Middle East Compromise,” *The New York Times*, December 14, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/15/world/middleeast/kerry-in-rome-on-foreign-policy-mission.html>.

<sup>826</sup> Ed Payne, “Pentagon: US to Begin to Train and Equip Moderate Syria Rebels,” *CNN*, January 16, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/01/16/us/syria-rebel-training/>.

<sup>827</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President in the State of the Union Address,” January 20, 2015 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/20/remarks-president-state-union-address-january-20-2015>.

- January 22, 2015      Sec. Hagel says, "We will begin deploying soon troops to the region to help train & equip the moderate Syrian opposition."<sup>828</sup>
- January 27, 2015      The Kurdish YPG captures Kobani, the strategic city that had been long under siege, from ISIS.<sup>829</sup>
- February 6, 2015      The White House releases the 2015 National Security Strategy. Outlining the U.S.'s security strategy for 2015, it reiterates the Obama Administration's stance that the only lasting solution to Syria's civil war is a political transition that represents the aspirations of all Syrian citizens.<sup>830</sup>
- February 11, 2015      Pres. Obama holds a press conference about the draft resolution he submitted to Congress to authorize the use of force against ISIL.<sup>831</sup> He states that he does not want the United States to be "dragged back into another prolonged ground war in the Middle East." He says this resolution provides authorization for the continued use of force to degrade and defeat the ISIS and provides flexibility for "limited circumstances, such as rescue operations involving U.S. or coalition personnel or the use of special operations forces to take military action against ISIL leadership".<sup>832</sup>
- March 1, 2015      The initial group of Syrian rebels armed by the U.S. collapses after Jabhat al-Nusra, a terrorist group affiliated with Al-Qaeda, captures its headquarters. The group was armed in 2014 with anti-tank missiles.<sup>833</sup>

<sup>828</sup> Chuck Hagel, "Department of Defense Press Briefing by Secretary Hagel in the Pentagon Briefing Room," News Transcript, January 22, 2015 (online by U.S. Department of Defense), <http://www.defense.gov/News/News-Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/606998/department-of-defense-press-briefing-by-secretary-hagel-in-the-pentagon-briefin>.

<sup>829</sup> Elliott McLaughlin, "Kobani liberated: Kurds take strategic city from ISIS," *CNN*, January 27, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/01/26/middleeast/syria-kobani-fighting/>.

<sup>830</sup> "National Security Strategy," Release, February 6, 2015 (online by the White House), [https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015\\_national\\_security\\_strategy.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy.pdf).

<sup>831</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President on Request to Congress for Authorization of Force Against ISIL," Remarks, February 11, 2015 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/11/remarks-president-request-congress-authorization-force-against-isil>.

<sup>832</sup> Barack Obama, "Letter from the President- Authorization for the Use of United States Armed Forces in Connection with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant", February 11, 2015 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/11/letter-president-authorization-use-united-states-armed-forces-connection>.

<sup>833</sup> Liz Sly, "Syrian Rebel Group that got U.S. Aid Disolves," *The Washington Post*, March 1, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/syrian-fighter-group-that-got-us-missiles-disolves-after-major-defeat/2015/03/01/286fa934-c048-11e4-a188-8e4971d37a8d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/syrian-fighter-group-that-got-us-missiles-disolves-after-major-defeat/2015/03/01/286fa934-c048-11e4-a188-8e4971d37a8d_story.html).

- March 2, 2015 Special Envoy Allen speaks at the Atlantic Council regarding ISIL, reiterating the lack of a partner on the ground in Syria, which makes the situation more challenging. He also reiterates that the U.S. is “working closely with regional partners to establish sites for training and equipping vetted, to moderate Syrian opposition elements, to train approximately 5,000 troops per year for the next 3 years”<sup>834</sup>
- May 7, 2015 Sec. Carter holds a joint press conference with Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Dempsey to announce the first class of train & equip, which formally launches with an initial class of 90. He states that trainees of the program should go operational in a matter of months, and that their mission is to fight ISIL. In that mission, the U.S. will provide them support. If they are confronted by regime forces, the U.S. would have “some responsibility to help them, but their principal mission is to engage with ISIS. Carter states that the trainees do receive compensation along with their training and equipment. In response to a question about U.S. responsibility if the trainees commit war crimes, Carter says, “an explicit part of their training is how to conduct themselves in a way that is consistent with international law.”<sup>835 836</sup>
- May 7, 2015 Carter announces that combat training has begun for nearly 90 fighters from the new Syrian forces and that a second group will begin training in the next few weeks.<sup>837</sup>
- May 12, 2015 Sec. Kerry meets with Russian FM Lavrov in Sochi. The two diplomats discussed today discussed ISIS, with Sec. Kerry noting, “while Russia is not a formal member of the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, Russia is a very important partner in the global effort against violent extremism,” continuing, “The

<sup>834</sup> John Allen, “Remarks at the Atlantic Council,” Remarks, March 2, 2015 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/s/seci/238108.htm>.

<sup>835</sup> Ashton Carter, “Department of Defense Press Briefing by Secretary Ash Carter and General Martin E. Dempsey in the Pentagon Briefing Room,” News Transcript, May 7, 2015 (online by U.S. Department of Defense), <http://www.defense.gov/News/News-Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/607048/department-of-defense-press-briefing-by-secretary-ash-carter-and-general-martin>.

<sup>836</sup> Missy Ryan, “U.S. begins training Syrian rebel force,” *The Washington Post*, May 7, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-begins-training-of-syrian-rebel-force/2015/05/07/5c5ac026-f4f0-11e4-bcc4-e8141e5eb0c9\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-begins-training-of-syrian-rebel-force/2015/05/07/5c5ac026-f4f0-11e4-bcc4-e8141e5eb0c9_story.html).

<sup>837</sup> Cheryl Pellerin, “Carter: Combat Training Begins for New Syrian Forces,” *DoD News*, May 7, 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/News-Article-View/Article/604596/carter-combat-training-begins-for-new-syrian-forces>

- US and Russia might work together on this in the days ahead, and Foreign Minister Lavrov and I agreed to examine specific concepts, but more importantly, to continue that conversation in the coming weeks with increased focus and purpose.”<sup>838</sup>
- May 13, 2015      Sec. Kerry offers a statement to the press at the NATO Ministerial meeting in Antalya, Turkey. He says that his colleagues discussed Syria, Libya, terrorism in general, and the responsibility of NATO to be able to come together to work on each of those challenges.<sup>839</sup>
- May 16, 2015      Defense Secretary Ash Carter announced in a statement that U.S. special operations forces conducted an operation in Syria to capture a senior leader of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant terrorist organization. “Abu Sayyaf was killed during the course of the operation when he engaged U.S. forces,” he said. “U.S. forces captured Umm Sayyaf, who we suspect is a member of ISIL, played an important role in ISIL's terrorist activities, and may have been complicit in what appears to have been the enslavement of a young Yazidi woman rescued last night,” Carter said.<sup>840</sup>
- May 21, 2015      In a press briefing, Press Sec. Earnest speaks about recent U.S. actions against ISIS. He says, “in the Iraq-Syria region, that if you look at populated areas that had previously been under control of ISIL, 25 percent of those areas -- or up to 25 percent of those areas are areas where ISIL fighters no longer have freedom of movement. There are areas where they have made gains in areas like Palmyra. But there are also areas where they've been in retreat, and those are regions on northeast Syria outside of Kobani. And that's an indication that we will have days of progress and periods of setback.”<sup>841</sup>

<sup>838</sup> John Kerry, “Press Availability With Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov,” Remarks, May 12, 2015 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2015/05/242214.htm>.

<sup>839</sup> John Kerry, “Statement to Press at NATO Ministerial,” Remarks, May 13, 2015 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2015/05/242222.htm>.

<sup>840</sup> “Carter: Special Operations Troops Conduct Raid in Syria,” *DoD News*, May 16, 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/News-Article-View/Article/604655/carter-special-operations-troops-conduct-raid-in-syria>.

<sup>841</sup> Josh Earnest, “Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 5/21/15,” Remarks, May 21, 2015 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/05/21/press-briefing-press-secretary-josh-earnest-52115>.

- June 3, 2015 Special Envoy Allen speaks at the Brookings-Doha U.S. Islamic World Forum., stating, “Daesh is not an Iraq or Syria problem; Daesh is a regional problem with global implications.” He also discusses Turkey’s border with Syria, emphasizing that the burden of closing off this 900km border to foreign fighters cannot rest with Turkey alone.<sup>842</sup>
- June 8, 2015 In a press conference following a Summit Meeting of the G-7, Pres. Obama states, “We don’t have, yet, a complete strategy, because it requires commitments on the part of Iraqis as well,” he continued, “The details are not worked out... We are still seeing thousands of foreign fighters flowing into, first, Syria, and then, oftentimes, ultimately into Iraq. And not all of that is preventable, but a lot of it is preventable -- if we’ve got better cooperation, better coordination, better intelligence, if we are monitoring what’s happening at the Turkish-Syria border more effectively. This is an area where we’ve been seeking deeper cooperation with Turkish authorities who recognize it’s a problem but haven’t fully ramped up the capacity they need. And this is something that I think we got to spend a lot of time on.”<sup>843</sup>
- June 16, 2015 Sec. Kerry states, “I am absolutely certain – we are certain – that the preponderance of those [chemical] attacks have been carried out by the regime, and we’re putting together a portfolio of that data that supports that even as we speak now.”<sup>844</sup>
- June 16, 2015 Special Envoy Allen speaks with Judy Woodruff of PBS NewsHour. Woodruff asks, “Has the – essentially the fight against ISIS just completely subsumed or all but subsumed the U.S. focus on President Assad?” to which Special Envoy Allen responds: “ Oh no, not at all. Things are not trending in his favor currently. Six months ago, he was in a different position than he is today, which I believe is a position of some instability, but weaker in his position as a leader. The United States and the Coalition partners are still strongly focused on a political process that removes

<sup>842</sup> John Allen, “Remarks at Brookings-Doha U.S. Islamic World Forum,” Remarks, June 3, 2015 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/s/seci/243115.htm>.

<sup>843</sup> Julie Davis and Michael Shear, “Ukraine Crisis and Advance of ISIS Dominate Agenda for Group of 7”, *The New York Times*, June 8, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/09/world/europe/united-states-increase-training-iraqis-fighting-isis-obama.html>

<sup>844</sup> John Kerry, “Secretary Kerry’s Press Availability,” Statements, June 16, 2015 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2015/06/243892.htm>.

- Bashar al-Assad from the leadership of Syria and places it in the hands of the Syrian people.”<sup>845</sup>
- June 18, 2015 The Pentagon acknowledges, in a CNN report, that train & equip “has run into a number of difficulties” including struggles to exfiltrate qualified fighters from Syria, as well as vetting possible candidates. According to the Pentagon, fewer than 200 of 6,000 volunteers have begun the program. Despite these difficulties, the U.S. continues to plan on training an additional 3,000 fighters in 2015, and an estimated 5,400 the following year.<sup>846</sup>
- June 26, 2015 The White House announces a \$500 million proposal to train & equip moderate opposition forces in Iraq. The plan was a major u-turn for the Obama administration, which had previously sought to limit its military involvement in Syria. Major hurdles looming ahead for the proposal include obtaining congressional approval and planning how to effectively vet and train large numbers of rebel fighters.<sup>847</sup>
- July 6, 2015 Pres. Obama discusses ISIL at the Pentagon. Regarding Syria, he says, “In Syria, the only way that the civil war will end -- and in a way so that the Syrian people can unite against ISIL -- is an inclusive political transition to a new government, without Bashar Assad -- a government that serves all Syrians.” He says that progress has been made in the fight against ISIL.”<sup>848</sup>
- July 7, 2015 Carter speaks before the Senate Armed Services Committee detailing the U.S.’s strategy in Syria and against ISIL. He says the U.S. is actively pursuing a political transition from Assad to a more “inclusive government with which we can also work to defeat ISIL.” The Department of Defense is also leading an air campaign and training and equipping vetted local forces in Iraq and Syria to fight ISIL. He discusses the

<sup>845</sup> John Allen, “Interview With Judy Woodruff, PBS NewsHour,” Interview, June 16, 2015 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/s/seci/246718.htm>.

<sup>846</sup> Barbara Starr, “Snag in Pentagon training of Syrian rebels to fight ISIS,” *CNN*, June 18, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/06/18/politics/syrian-rebels-pentagon-training-isis/>.

<sup>847</sup> Julian Barnes, Adam Entous, and Carol Lee, “Obama Proposes \$500 Million to Aid Syrian Rebels,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 26, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/obama-proposes-500-million-to-aid-syrian-rebels-1403813486>.

<sup>848</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President on Progress in the Fight Against ISIL,” Remarks, July 6, 2015 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/07/06/remarks-president-progress-fight-against-isil>.

- train & equip program in Syria in more detail, stating that the D.O.D. is currently reviewing screening and vetting over 7,000 volunteers and is actively training 60 fighters. He acknowledges this is a much smaller number than they were hoping for at this point.<sup>849</sup>
- July 7, 2015      Sec. Carter testifies before the Senate Armed Services Committee. He says that in Syria, the Department of Defense is three months into its train & equip mission. Training is underway and work is ongoing to screen and vet nearly 7,000 volunteers “to ensure they are committed to fighting ISIL, pass a counterintelligence screening and meet standards prescribed by U.S. law regarding the law of armed conflict and necessitated by operations.” Carter says that as of July 3, the department is training about 60 fighters, adding that vetting standards have whittled the expected numbers. “But we know this program is essential. We need a partner on the ground in Syria to assure ISIL’s lasting defeat.”<sup>850</sup>
- July 12, 2015      The first U.S. trained Syrian rebels (54 in total) enter Syria through the Jordanian border. Several fighters are immediately captured, and another unit is attacked by an affiliate of al Qaeda. The second group entering Syria hands over 25 percent of the weapons supplied by the U.S. to al-Nusra.<sup>851</sup>
- July 15, 2015      In a press conference, Pres. Obama says, “my key goal when I turn over the keys to the President -- the next President -- is that we are on track to defeat ISIL; that they are much more contained and we’re moving in the right direction there. That we have jump started a process to resolve the civil war in Syria, which is like an open sore in the region and is giving refuge to terrorist organizations who are taking advantage of that chaos...I do agree that we’re not going to solve the problems in Syria unless there’s buy-in from the Russians, the Iranians, the Turks, our Gulf partners. It’s too chaotic. There are too

<sup>849</sup> Ashton Carter, “Statement on Counter-ISIL before the Senate Armed Services Committee,” Speech, July 7, 2015 (online by U.S. Department of Defense), <http://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech-View/Article/611705/statement-on-counter-isil-before-the-senate-armed-services-committee>.

<sup>850</sup> Cheryl Pellerin, “Carter: DoD, Global Coalition Seek ISIL’s Lasting Defeat,” *DoD News*, July 7, 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/News-Article-View/Article/612612/carter-dod-global-coalition-seek-isils-lasting-defeat>.

<sup>851</sup> Eric Schmitt and Ben Hubbard, “U.S. Revamping Rebel Force Fighting ISIS in Syria,” *The New York Times*, September 6, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/07/world/middleeast/us-to-revamp-training-program-to-fight-isis.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/07/world/middleeast/us-to-revamp-training-program-to-fight-isis.html?_r=0).

- many factions. There's too much money and too many arms flooding into the zone. It's gotten caught up in both sectarian conflict and geopolitical jockeying. And in order for us to resolve it, there's going to have to be agreement among the major powers that are interested in Syria that this is not going to be won on the battlefield."<sup>852</sup>
- July 23, 2015 Turkey announces that it will allow the U.S. access to Incirlik air base in order to launch strikes against ISIS. Three weeks later, the U.S. is flying its first manned airstrikes from the airbase.<sup>853</sup>
- July 31, 2015 Train & equip forces come under attack in Syria from al-Nusra, a day after the al-Qaeda affiliate captured two leaders and six fighters from one of train & equip's divisions.<sup>854</sup> August 2, 2015: Pres. Obama authorizes air defenses for train & equip forces in Syria following multiple attacks on the group.<sup>855</sup>
- August 4, 2015 Defense Dept. officials indicate that al-Nusra has captured additional members of U.S. train and equip program.<sup>856</sup>
- August 7, 2015 The UN Security Council passes Resolution 2235 on a Syrian Chemical Weapons Joint Investigative Mechanism.
- August 13, 2015 At the UN, Amb. Power strongly condemns the Assad regime's intensified bombing of civilians and civilian infrastructure across Syria, along with its continued use of barrel bombs.<sup>857</sup>
- August 14, 2015 Answering a question about the use of mustard gas in Syria, Sec. Kerry says, that the U.S. is working with on a

<sup>852</sup> Barack Obama, "Press Conference by the President," Statement, July 15, 2015 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/07/15/press-conference-president>.

<sup>853</sup> Ceylan Yeginsu and Helene Cooper, "U.S. Jets to Use Turkish Bases in War On ISIS," *The New York Times*, July 23, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/24/world/europe/turkey-isis-us-airstrikes-syria.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/24/world/europe/turkey-isis-us-airstrikes-syria.html?_r=0).

<sup>854</sup> Anne Barnard and Eric Schmitt, "Rivals of ISIS Attack U.S.-Backed Syrian Rebel Group," *The New York Times*, July 31, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/01/world/middleeast/nusra-front-attacks-us-backed-syrian-rebel-group.html>.

<sup>855</sup> Adam Entous, "U.S. to Defend New Syria Force From Assad Regime," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 2, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/pentagon-to-defend-new-syria-force-from-assad-regime-others-1438549937>.

<sup>856</sup> "Train-and-equip Syrian fighters held by Nusra: Pentagon," *Hurriyet Daily News*, August 5, 2015, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/train-and-equip-syrian-fighters-held-by-nusra-pentagon---.aspx?pageID=238&nID=86458&NewsCatID=359>.

<sup>857</sup> Samantha Power, "Statement on the Syrian Regime's Ongoing Use of Barrel Bombs in Civilian Areas," Remarks, August 13, 2015 (online by U.S. Mission to the United Nations), <http://usun.state.gov/remarks/6792>.

- UN resolution with Russia and other nations to get to the bottom of this claim.<sup>858</sup>
- August 17, 2015 The White House issues a statement strongly condemning deadly airstrikes perpetrated by the Assad regime on a market in the Damascus suburb of Douma.<sup>859</sup>
- August 20, 2015 In the press briefing room, Sec. Carter discusses the Syrian train & equip program. Following a question from a reporter inquiring about the 54 people being trained in this program, Sec. Carter says, “we need Syrian train & equip...forces that coalesce into a coherent fighting force or can associate themselves with other coherent fighting forces that we can then support and that can retake and hold territory in Syria...”<sup>860</sup>
- September 4, 2015 The New York Times reports that Russia has sent a military advance team to Syria and is taking other steps the United States fears may signal that President Vladimir V. Putin is planning to vastly expand his military support for President Bashar al-Assad of Syria, administration officials said Friday.<sup>861</sup>
- September 5, 2015 Sec. Kerry calls Russian FM Lavrov to discuss Syria, including U.S. concerns about reports suggesting an imminent enhanced Russian build-up within the country.<sup>862</sup>
- September 8, 2015 Pentagon Press Sec. Cook says that Sec. Carter “still believes that it’s important to provide support to those moderate Syrian force. We’ve seen and the secretary’s been candid about what happened initially with the train & equip program. We’ve learned lessons from that, continue to learn les-

<sup>858</sup> John Kerry, “Interview With Elise Labott of CNN,” Interview, August 14, 2015 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2015/08/246305.htm>.

<sup>859</sup> “Statement by NSC Spokesperson Ned Price on the Market Bombing in Douma, Syria,” Press Release, August 17, 2015 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/08/17/statement-nsc-spokesperson-ned-price-market-bombing-douma-syria>.

<sup>860</sup> Ashton Carter, “Department of Defense Press Briefing with Secretary Carter in the Pentagon Press Briefing Room,” News Transcript, August 20, 2015 (online by U.S. Department of Defense), <http://www.defense.gov/News/News-Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/614330/departement-of-defense-press-briefing-with-secretary-carter-in-the-pentagon-pres>.

<sup>861</sup> Michael Gordon and Eric Schmitt, “Russian Moves in Syria Pose Concerns for U.S.,” *The New York Times*, September 4, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/05/world/middleeast/russian-moves-in-syria-pose-concerns-for-us.html>.

<sup>862</sup> “Readout of Secretary Kerry’s Call With Foreign Minister Lavrov,” Press Release, September 5, 2015 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/09/246664.htm>.

- sons from that, and we're going to continue moving forward with that program.”<sup>863</sup>
- September 9, 2015 Senior national security officials meet to discuss how to revamp the fledgling Pentagon train & equip program.<sup>864</sup>
- September 10, 2015 Special Envoy Allen speaks with CNN. Allen says he thinks it's a bad idea for Russia to use combat forces to prop up the regime of Bashar al-Assad.<sup>865</sup>
- September 10, 2015 U.S. military intelligence sources say there is evidence Russia is sending troops and military hardware to bolster Assad's forces.<sup>866</sup>
- September 10, 2015 Sec. Kerry expresses concerns about reports of increased Russian military activities in Syria, warning that may bring yet more violence to the country.<sup>867</sup>
- September 11, 2015 Russia denies reports that it is increasing its military presence in Syria, insisting that it is only humanitarian aid and military equipment being deployed in accordance with its existing contracts. Russian FM Lavrov tells reporters, "We have never made our military presence (in Syria) a secret."<sup>868</sup>
- September 12, 2015 Sec. Carter says that the "U.S. military is still waiting on Congress to release \$116 million it requested for the train & equip program of Syrian opposition forces."<sup>869</sup>
- September 15, 2015 In a phone conversation with Russian FM Lavrov, Sec. Ker-

<sup>863</sup> Peter Cook, "Department of Defense Press Briefing by Pentagon Press Secretary Peter Cook in the Pentagon Briefing Room," News Transcript, September 8, 2015 (online by U.S. Department of Defense), <http://www.defense.gov/News/News-Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/616516/departement-of-defense-press-briefing-by-pentagon-press-secretary-peter-cook-in>.

<sup>864</sup> Barbara Starr, "Pentagon reviews troubled program to train Syrian rebels," *CNN*, September 9, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/09/09/politics/syrian-rebels-pentagon-train-and-equip/>.

<sup>865</sup> John Allen, "Interview of General John Allen With Jake Tapper, CNN on Counter-ISIL Coalition Anniversary," Interview, September 10, 2015 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/s/seci/246798.htm>.

<sup>866</sup> "Russian presence in Syria growing, sources say, as US warns Moscow conflict will escalate if it provides military support to Assad," *ABC News*, September 10, 2015, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-09-10/russian-military-buildup-continues-in-syria/6764670>.

<sup>867</sup> "Kerry and NATO warn Russia over military acts in Syria," *Al Jazeera*, September 10, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/09/kerry-nato-warn-russia-military-acts-syria-150910052623584.html>.

<sup>868</sup> "Russia denies military buildup in Syria," *The Global Times*, September 11, 2015, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/941862.shtml>.

<sup>869</sup> Yuri Gripas, "Pentagon Urges Congress to Release \$116 Million for Syrian Train-Equip Program," *Sputnik News*, December 9, 2015, <http://sputniknews.com/us/20151209/1031494793/pentagon-syria.html>.

- ry makes clear that Russia's continued support for President Assad risks exacerbating and extending the conflict, and undermining the shared goal of fighting extremism if the two countries do not also remain focused on finding a solution to the conflict in Syria via a genuine political transition.<sup>870</sup>
- September 18, 2015 Sec. Carter has a conversation with Russian Defense Minister Shoygu on the situation in Syria. The two discuss about areas where the United States and Russia's perspectives overlap and areas of divergence. They agree to further discuss mechanisms for deconfliction in Syria and the counter-Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) campaign.<sup>871</sup>
- September 19, 2015 Sec. State Kerry says that Russian deployment of military equipment in Syria raises "serious questions" about Russia's goals for the region. Moscow alleges that the buildup is part of its mission to combat ISIS.<sup>872</sup>
- September 20, 2015 Fox News reports that U.S. officials are expressing growing concern about Russia's military build-up in Assad-controlled Syria, calling it "unprecedented" -- with one telling Fox News it compares in scope to Vladimir Putin's incursion into Crimea.<sup>873</sup>
- September 24, 2015 Sec. Carter says Russia's expanding military buildup in Syria could "pour gasoline on the [Islamic State] phenomenon," because Moscow is bent on backing one of the extremist group's top enemies, Syrian President Assad. Any successful effort to crush ISIS without simultaneously pursuing a political transition away from Mr. Assad will only "fuel the very kind of extremism that underlies ISIL."<sup>874</sup>

<sup>870</sup> "Readout of Secretary Kerry's Call With Foreign Minister Lavrov," Press Release, September 15, 2015 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/09/246963.htm>.

<sup>871</sup> "Readout of Secretary Carter's Call with Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Shoygu," Press Release, September 18, 2015 (online by U.S. Department of Defense), <http://www.defense.gov/News/News-Releases/News-Release-View/Article/617775/readout-of-secretary-carters-call-with-russian-minister-of-defense-sergei-shoygu>.

<sup>872</sup> Michael Gordon and Eric Schmitt, "Russian Buildup in Syria Raises Questions on Role," *The New York Times*, September 19, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/20/world/middleeast/russian-buildup-in-syria-raises-questions-on-role.html>.

<sup>873</sup> "Kerry: Russian fighter jets in Syria raise serious questions," *Al Jazeera*, September 19, 2015, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/9/19/kerry-russian-fighter-jets-in-syria-disturbing.html>.

<sup>874</sup> Guy Taylor, "Ashton Carter: Russian buildup in Syria could 'pour gasoline' on ISIS," *The Washington Times*, September 24, 2015, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/sep/24/carter-russian-buildup-syria-could-pour-gas-isis/>.

- September 27, 2015 Russian Pres. Putin says that Russia had no plans "right now" to deploy combat troops to Syria, but affirmed that it would continue backing the Syrian government.<sup>875</sup>
- September 28, 2015 Pres. Obama addresses the U.N. General Assembly. "Nowhere is our commitment to international order more tested than in Syria." He states that military power is not sufficient to resolve the situation in Syria, and that the United States is prepared to work with any nation, including Russia and Iran, to resolve the conflict. He adds, "This work will take time. There are no easy answers to Syria."<sup>876</sup>
- September 28, 2015 Pres. Obama meets with Russian President Putin on the sidelines of the U.N. General Assembly. A senior administration official says the White House got "clarity" on Russian objectives in Syria: defeating the Islamic State group and supporting Assad.<sup>877</sup>
- September 29, 2015 Pres. Obama speaks at the Summit to Counter ISIL and Violent Extremism in New York. He says, "I believe what we have here today is the emergence of a global movement that is united by the mission of degrading and ultimately destroying ISIL. In Syria, as I said yesterday, defeating ISIL requires a new leader and an inclusive government that unites the Syrian people in the fight against terrorist groups. This is going to be a complex process. And as I've said before, we are prepared to work with all countries, including Russia and Iran, to find a political mechanism in which it is possible to begin a transition process."<sup>878</sup>
- September 29, 2015 The White House denies reports that the train & equip pro-

<sup>875</sup> Jack Stubbs and Denis Dyomkin, "Putin says Russia has no plans to deploy combat troops in Syria," *Reuters*, September 28, 2015, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-putin-usa-idUKKCN0RR14R20150927>.

<sup>876</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks by President Obama to the United Nations General Assembly," Remarks, September 28, 2015 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/28/remarks-president-obama-United-nations-general-assembly>.

<sup>877</sup> Teresa Welsh, "Obama, Putin Meet in New York," *US News*, September 28, 2015, <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/09/28/obama-putin-meet-in-new-york>.

<sup>878</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks by President Obama at the Leaders' Summit on Countering ISIL and Violent Extremism," Remarks, September 29, 2015 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/29/remarks-president-obama-leaders-summit-countering-isil-and-violent>.

- gram has been suspended.<sup>879</sup>
- September 29, 2015      Sec. Carter directs his staff to “open lines of communication with Russia on deconflicting” the military missions of the two countries in Syria, to ensure that American operations are not disrupted by Russian military activity.<sup>880</sup>
- September 30, 2015      Russia begins airstrikes in Syria against opponents of Assad’s regime. The U.S. says it was informed of the strikes only hours before they began.<sup>881</sup>
- October 2, 2015          Pres. Obama holds a press conference. He says the reason Assad is still in power is because Russia and Iran have supported him throughout this process. He says he had made clear to President Putin that the only way to solve the problem in Syria is “to have a political transition that is inclusive—that keeps the state intact, that keeps the military intact, that maintains cohesion, but that is inclusive— and the only way to accomplish that is for Mr. Assad to transition, because you cannot rehabilitate him in the eyes of Syrians” He clarifies that the U.S. will not impose a military solution. He states, “Eventually Syria will fall, the Assad regime will fall, and we have to have somebody who we’re working with that we can help pick up the pieces and stitch back together a cohesive, coherent country” Pres.Obama acknowledges that the train & equip program has “not worked in the way it was supposed to.” He reiterates that Syria will not turn into a proxy war between the United States and Russia.<sup>882</sup>
- October 2, 2016          In a meeting with senior aides, Pres. Obama decides that the U.S. will not directly confront Russia over Moscow’s recent-

<sup>879</sup> Kristina Wong, “Administration: Syrian train and equip program not suspended,” *The Hill*, September 29, 2015, <http://thehill.com/policy/defense/255304-administration-syrian-train-and-equip-program-not-suspended>.

<sup>880</sup> Helene Cooper and Michael Gordon, “Russia Buildup Seen as Fanning Flames in Syria,” *The New York Times*, September 29, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/30/world/russia-buildup-seen-as-fanning-flames-in-syria.html>.

<sup>881</sup> “Syria Crisis: Russian Air Strikes Against ISIS Enemies,” *CNN*, September 30, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34399164>

<sup>882</sup> Barack Obama, “Press Conference by the President,” Remarks, October 2, 2015 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/10/02/press-conference-president>.

- ly launched air campaign in Syria.<sup>883</sup>
- October 5, 2015 The Wall Street Journal reports that Russia is intentionally targeting backed Syrian rebel groups in airstrikes in Syria.<sup>884</sup>
- October 5, 2015 Speaking from Madrid, Sec. Carter discusses Russia's behavior in Syria, stating that Russia is "escalated the civil war, putting further at risk the very political resolution and preservation of Syria's structure of future governance it says that it wants." He adds, "The U.S. position is clear that a lasting defeat of ISIL and extremism in Syria can only be achieved if pursued in parallel with a political transition in Syria."<sup>885</sup>
- October 8, 2015 Sec. Carter meets with NATO defense ministers in Brussels to discuss Russia's involvement in Syria He says that Russian targeting of opposition forces "is a fundamental strategic mistake and that it will inflame and prolong the Syrian civil war." Regarding the U.S.'s strategy in Syria, he says the U.S. "will continue to support the moderate Syrian opposition. We will seek an agreement with the Russians on professional safety procedures for coalition pilots. And we will leave the door open for Russia to rejoin the track toward a political transition in Damascus."<sup>886</sup>
- October 9, 2015 The White House announces an "operational pause" in the original train & equip program. The new U.S. plan will be "taking some of the leaders of these groups who are already fighting on the ground, putting them through the same rigorous vetting process that we have used in the original program, and then giving them basic equipment packages

<sup>883</sup> Karen DeYoung, Juliet Eilperin, and Greg Miller, "U.S. will not directly confront Russia in Syria, Obama says," *The Washington Post*, October 2, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/2015/10/02/44c1f7fc-6932-11e5-9223-70cb36460919\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/2015/10/02/44c1f7fc-6932-11e5-9223-70cb36460919_story.html).

<sup>884</sup> Adam Entous, "U.S. Sees Russian Drive Against CIA-Backed Rebels in Syria," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 5, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-concludes-russia-targeting-cia-backed-rebels-in-syria-1444088319>.

<sup>885</sup> Ashton Carter, "Remarks at Spanish Center for Advanced Studies of National Defense: "Strong and Principled Security Cooperation," Speech, October 5, 2015 (online by U.S. Department of Defense), <http://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech-View/Article/621829/remarks-at-spanish-center-for-advanced-studies-of-national-defense-strong-and-p>.

<sup>886</sup> Cheryl Pellerin, "Carter Addresses Syria, Afghanistan, Modern NATO Mission," *DOD News*, October 8, 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/News-Article-View/Article/622446/carter-addresses-syria-afghanistan-modern-nato-mission>.

- to distribute to their fighting force.”<sup>887</sup>
- October 11, 2015 American C-17 cargo planes drop 50 tons of ammunition, M-16s and AK-47s, grenades, and mortar and rocket-propelled grenade rounds to Arab forces confronting ISIS in northern Syria. The Department of Defense does not identify the groups, but says that their “leaders were appropriately vetted by the U.S. and have been fighting to remove ISIL from northern Syria” and claims that the supplies “reached friendly forces.” It is reported that Kurdish groups are the main receivers of these U.S. airdrops. However, during a press briefing, Pentagon spokesman Peter Cook states, “My understanding is that this specifically went to Syrian Arab forces.”<sup>888</sup>
- October 13, 2015 Special Envoy Allen speaks to the Economic Club of New York, saying, “We reject Russia’s assertion that everybody opposed to the regime of Bashar al-Assad is a terrorist. We think that is self-defeating and will only draw Russia into a quagmire. And can only be used as a further recruitment tool for foreign fighters to join groups like Daesh. Let me be clear: Mr. Putin had to go into Syria not out of strength but out of weakness, because his client, Mr. Asad, was crumbling. And only Iran is lining up behind him to support this plan. There may be some short-term appearance of tactical benefit, as Russia stabilizes and props up the Assad regime, but unless Russia remains to assist Asad in crushing every component of the Syrian Opposition, the Assad regime will continue to require foreign support to survive. Let me be clear, this is NOT a contest between the United States and Russia. It is in our interest for Russia to be a responsible, effective actor on the international stage. Our battle remains, and will continue to remain, with Daesh.”<sup>889</sup>
- October 14, 2015 Sec. Carter discusses Syria at the Association of the U.S. Army’s Annual Convention. He says that Russia’s behavior in Syria is concerning, as its air force’s behavior has been

<sup>887</sup> Ben Rhodes, Christine Wormuth and Brett McGurk, “Press Call on Counter ISIL Campaign,” October 9, 2015 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/10/09/press-call-counter-isil-campaign>.

<sup>888</sup> Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “Pentagon Airdrops Ammunition to Groups Fighting the Islamic State,” *The Washington Post*, October 12 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2015/10/12/pentagon-airdrops-ammunition-to-groups-fighting-the-islamic-state/>.

<sup>889</sup> John Allen, “Remarks to the Economic Club of New York,” Remarks, October 13, 2015 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/s/seci/248652.htm>.

- “unprofessional,” referring to its recent flight into Turkish airspace, and its joint ground offensive with the Syrian regime has made clear that it is not in Syria to fight ISIL.<sup>890</sup>
- October 14, 2015 Former Presidential Advisor on Syria Amb. Frederic Hof writes for *Politico*, “I spent early 2011 trying to ease tensions between Syria and its neighbors. I never predicted the brutality that would come from the inside.” He continued to predict, “Obama will bequeath to his successor a problem of gargantuan dimensions if he does not change policy course now.”<sup>891</sup>
- October 16, 2015 Pres. Obama says “It is essential to get the Iranians, the Russians, the Turks, the Gulf countries and all the interested parties to sit down and recognize we have to have a political transition if we want to end the humanitarian crisis and save the structure of a unified Syrian state.” He also emphasizes that the U.S. is only cooperating with Russia to the extent that it will prevent accidental clashes between air missions.<sup>892</sup>
- October 16, 2015 Pres. Obama speaks with Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan by phone. “They agreed that Russia’s military operations in Syria should focus on ISIL – not moderate Syrian opposition groups – and reaffirmed the importance of establishing the conditions necessary for a political transition in Syria.”<sup>893</sup>
- October 20, 2015 Russia and the U.S. sign an agreement to minimize the risk of in-flight incidents between all aircraft and drone flights operating in Syrian airspace. Pentagon Press Secretary Peter Cook outlines that, “These protocols include maintaining professional airmanship at all times, the use of specific communication frequencies and the establishment of a communication line on the ground. The U.S. and Russia will form

<sup>890</sup> Ashton Carter, “Remarks to the Association of the U.S. Army Annual Convention,” Speech, October 14, 2015 (online by U.S. Department of Defense), <http://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech-View/Article/623099/remarks-to-the-association-of-the-us-army-annual-convention>.

<sup>891</sup> Frederic Hof, “I Got Syria So Wrong,” *Politico*, October 14, 2014, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/10/syria-civil-war-213242?o=1>.

<sup>892</sup> Kevin Lamarque, “Obama says ‘no meeting of minds with Russia on Syria,’” *Reuters*, October 16, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-obama-idUSKCN0SA2I420151016>.

<sup>893</sup> “Readout of the President’s Call with Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan,” Press Release, October 16, 2015 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/10/16/readout-presidents-call-abu-dhabi-crown-prince-sheikh-mohammed-bin-zayed>.

- a working group to discuss any implementation issues that follow.”<sup>894</sup>
- October 22, 2015 Speaking at the UN about Russian engagement in Syria, Amb. Power says, “Since Russia began its strikes, the Syrian map has shifted in ISIL’s favor: civilians are on the move in terror and ISIL is on the move gaining ground. Let me be clear: aiding and abetting Assad’s military as it targets the very groups that we need to bring to the negotiating table will only prolong the conflict and push a political solution further from reach. This conflict will not end until Syria is free of Assad. Supporting him now only ensures that by the time a political transition is negotiated, ISIL will only be stronger; its recruitment having been bolstered by the actions of Russia, Iran, and the regime; and the Syrian state will only be weaker, the country more fragmented, and the heartbreak for families across the country, more widespread.”<sup>895</sup>
- October 23, 2015 The State Dept. announces the departure of Special Presidential Envoy John Allen and appointment of Brett McGurk.<sup>896</sup>
- October 27, 2015 Sec. Carter testifies before the Senate Armed Services Committee regarding the U.S. counter-ISIL military campaign. Carter describes the changes he’d like to implement to the U.S. military campaign, which he calls the “Three R’s”: Raqqa, Ramadi, and raids. In Syria, he aims for the Syrian Arab Coalition to work towards destroying ISIL’s capital in Raqqa. He expresses disappointment with the train & equip program, and says that the new program will focus on working with vetted leaders of groups already fighting ISIL, building on successes of Syrian Arabs and Kurds. Sec. Carter also comments on Russia’s involvement in Syria and

<sup>894</sup> Peter Cook, “Department of Defense Press Briefing,” News Transcript, October 20, 2015 (online by U.S. Department of Defense), <http://www.defense.gov/News/News-Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/624976/departments-of-defense-press-briefing-by-pentagon-press-secretary-peter-cook-in>.

<sup>895</sup> Samantha Power, “Remarks at a UN Security Council Open Debate on the Middle East,” Remarks, October 22, 2015 (online by U.S. Mission to the United Nations), <http://usun.state.gov/remarks/6910>.

<sup>896</sup> John Kerry, “Departure of Special Presidential Envoy John Allen and Appointment of Brett McGurk,” Statement, October 23, 2015 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2015/10/248665.htm>.

- its targeting of opposition forces.<sup>897</sup>
- October 31, 2015 Sec. Carter says Russia is "doomed to fail" in Syria, while the goal of the U.S. remains defeating the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant in both Syria and Iraq. He says Russia has not "thought through very thoroughly" its actions in Syria. While Russia said it was going to fight ISIL, it is not doing that.<sup>898</sup>
- November 4, 2015 In testimony presented to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Assistant Sec. of State for Near Eastern Affairs Patterson outlines the four major components of the U.S. strategy for Syria as the following, "1) defeat ISIL militarily in both Syria and Iraq; (2) develop a political transition that gives Syria a future without Bashar al-Assad; (3) ease the suffering of the Syrian people; and, (4) stabilize our regional allies and help European partners as they cope with a massive refugee crisis." She continued, "Our strategy regarding the Syrian conflict remains fundamentally the same, to leverage military action and diplomacy to achieve a political transition in which Syrians ultimately have a government that respects the rights of its people and Syria retains its unity, independence, territorial integrity and secular character."<sup>899</sup>
- November 15, 2015 Pres. Obama talks with Russian Pres. Vladimir Putin prior to the opening of G-20 sessions Antalya. He later remarks "When we were in Turkey I discussed with Pres. Putin, in a brief pull-aside, his need to recognize that he needs to go after the people who killed Russian citizens. And those aren't the groups that they were currently hitting with strikes. So they're going to have to make an adjustment in terms of what they're prioritizing."<sup>900</sup>

<sup>897</sup> Ashton Carter, "Statement on the U.S. Military Strategy in the Middle East and the Counter-ISIL Campaign before the Senate Armed Services Committee," Speech, October 27, 2015 (online by U.S. Department of Defense), <http://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech-View/Article/626037/statement-on-the-us-military-strategy-in-the-middle-east-and-the-counter-isil-c>.

<sup>898</sup> Lisa Ferdinando, "Carter: Russia 'Doomed to Fail' in Syria; ISIL Must be Defeated," *DoD News*, October 31, 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/News-Article-View/Article/626828/carter-russia-doomed-to-fail-in-syria-isil-must-be-defeated>.

<sup>899</sup> Anne Patterson, Testimony Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, November 4, 2015, <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA00/20151104/104160/HHRG-114-FA00-Wstate-PattersonA-20151104.pdf>.

<sup>900</sup> Marcy Krieter, "US President Barack Obama Calls on Russia to Change Its Approach to Syria to Defeat ISIS," *International Business Times*, November 22, 2015, <http://www.ibtimes.com/us-president-barack-obama-calls-russia-change-its-approach-syria-defeat-isis-2195299>.

- November 13, 2015      ISIS kills 130 people in a series of attacks across Paris.<sup>901</sup>
- November 16, 2015      Pres. Obama holds a press conference from Antalya, Turkey at the G20 Summit. He discusses diplomatic progress in ending the Syrian civil war: “we’ve begun to see some modest progress on the diplomatic front, which is critical because a political solution is the only way to end the war in Syria and unite the Syrian people and the world against ISIL. The Vienna talks mark the first time that all the key countries have come together -- as a result, I would add, of American leadership -- and reached a common understanding. In terms of decreasing ISIL’s ability to carry out attacks worldwide, he says “our ability to shrink the space in which they can operate, combined with a resolution to the Syria situation -- which will reduce the freedom with which they feel that they can operate, and getting local forces who are able to hold and keep them out over the long term, that ultimately is going to be what’s going to make a difference.” He also says we must “not close our hearts to these victims of such violence and somehow start equating the issue of refugees with the issue of terrorism.”<sup>902</sup>
- November 19, 2015      Pres. Obama speaks at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation summit, maintaining ““Bottom line is, I do not foresee a situation in which we can end the civil war in Syria while Assad remains in power.”<sup>903</sup>
- November 24, 2015      Pres. Obama holds a joint press conference with French Pres. Hollande. He says, “With respect to Mr. Assad, I think we’ve got to let the Vienna process play itself out. It is our best opportunity. And so the notion that there would be an immediate date in advance of us getting a broad agreement on that political process and the details I think doesn’t make sense. As soon as we have a framework for a political transition -- potentially, a new constitution, elections -- I think it’s in that context that we can start looking at Mr. Assad choos-

<sup>901</sup> Steve Almsy, Pierre Meilhan and Jim Bittermann, “Paris massacre: At least 128 killed in gunfire and blasts, French officials say,” *CNN*, November 14, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/11/13/world/paris-shooting/>.

<sup>902</sup> Barack Obama, “Press Conference by President Obama -- Antalya, Turkey,” Press Briefing, November 16, 2015 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/11/16/press-conference-president-obama-antalya-turkey>.

<sup>903</sup> “Obama says Syria settlement needed to eliminate Islamic State,” *Reuters*, November 19, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/11/19/obama-says-syria-settlement-needed-to-eliminate-islamic-state.html>.

- ing not to run and potentially seeing a new Syria emerge.”<sup>904</sup>
- November 24, 2015 Turkey downs a Russian jet violating its airspace along Turkish-Syrian border. NATO and US stand in solidarity with Turkey. U.S. and Turkish officials confirm that the jet briefly entered Turkish airspace prior to its downing. Russia denies that its plan entered Turkey.<sup>905</sup>
- December 1, 2015 Sec. Carter testifies before the House Armed Services Committee regarding the U.S. counter-ISIL military campaign. He says the U.S. is gaining momentum on the battlefield in Syria and Iraq, citing that local forces in northern Syria are fighting ISIL along the Ma'ra line, and Syrian Arabs and Kurds have recaptured important territory and are focusing on recapturing Raqqa. The Secretary also says that the coalition hopes to open a southern front on ISIL.<sup>906</sup>
- December 7, 2015 Syria claims the U.S. led anti-ISIL coalition bombed a Syrian military base. The U.S. denied the accusation, instead saying that a Russian airplane had been responsible.<sup>907</sup>
- December 9, 2015 Sec. Carter testifies before the Senate Armed Services Committee regarding the U.S. counter-ISIL military campaign. The campaign adopts three approaches: taking the fight to the enemy where they are, developing local ground forces, and setting the conditions for a political solution in Syria. Carter reiterates statements made in his previous speech in front of the House Armed Services Committee.<sup>908</sup>

<sup>904</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by President Obama and President Hollande of France in Joint Press Conference,” Remarks, November 24, 2015 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/11/24/remarks-president-obama-and-president-hollande-france-joint-press>.

<sup>905</sup> Dion Nissenbaum, Emre Peker, and James Marson, “Turkey Shoots Down Russian Military Jet,” *The Wall Street Journal*, November 24, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/turkey-shoots-down-jet-near-syria-border-1448356509>.

<sup>906</sup> Ashton Carter, “Statement on the U.S. Military Strategy in the Middle East and the Counter-ISIL Campaign before the House Armed Services Committee,” Speech, December 1, 2015 (online by U.S. Department of Defense), <http://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech-View/Article/631649/statement-on-the-us-military-strategy-in-the-middle-east-and-the-counter-isil-c>.

<sup>907</sup> Hwaida Saad and Eric Schmitt, “Syria Blames U.S. in Base Bombing, but Americans Blame Russia,” *The New York Times*, December 7, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/08/world/middleeast/syria-airstrikes.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/08/world/middleeast/syria-airstrikes.html?_r=0).

<sup>908</sup> Ashton Carter, “Statement on the Counter-ISIL Campaign before the Senate Armed Services Committee,” Speech, December 9, 2015 (online by U.S. Department of Defense), <http://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech-View/Article/633510/statement-on-the-counter-isil-campaign-before-the-senate-armed-services-committ>.

- December 14, 2015 Pres. Obama holds a press conference at the Pentagon. He gives an update on the anti-ISIL campaign, saying “So far, ISIL has lost about 40 percent of the populated areas it once controlled in Iraq. ISIL also continues to lose territory in Syria. We continue to step up our air support and supplies to local forces -- Syrian Kurds, Arabs, Christians, Turkmen -- and they’re having success...I’ve asked Secretary Carter to go to the Middle East -- he’ll depart right after this press briefing -- to work with our coalition partners on securing more military contributions to this fight. On the diplomatic front, Secretary Kerry will be in Russia tomorrow as we continue to work, as part of the Vienna process, to end the Syrian civil war. Meanwhile, here at home, the Department of Homeland Security is updating its alert system to help the American people stay vigilant and safe...The Special Forces that I ordered to Syria have begun supporting local forces as they push south, cut off supply lines and tighten the squeeze on Raqqa.”<sup>909</sup>
- December 15, 2015 Sec. Kerry visits Moscow to discuss Syria, ISIS, and Iraq with his Russian counterpart, FM Lavrov and Pres. Putin. During press availability he tells reporters, “We started with negotiations at Russian foreign ministry and we continued here in the Kremlin during the meeting with President Putin. Negotiations in the morning and in the evening were concrete, specific. We were focusing on issues of Syrian settlement with the link on intensifying our efforts to counter terrorism. ISIL, Jabhat al-Nusrah, and other terrorist groups are a common threat to every one of us, and today, we reiterated our determination to uproot this evil. We reiterated the arrangements reached between the military of the Russian Federation and the U.S., arrangements that are applied to the U.S.-led coalition is working against ISIL.”<sup>910</sup>
- December 18, 2015 During a press conference, Pres. Obama discusses Syria. Regarding Assad, he says, “The reason that Assad has been a problem in Syria is because that is a majority-Sunni country and he had lost the space that he had early on to execute an

<sup>909</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President on the Military Campaign to Destroy ISIL,” Remarks, December 14, 2015 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/12/14/remarks-president-military-campaign-destroy-isil>.

<sup>910</sup> John Kerry, “Press Availability With Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov,” Press Release, December 15, 2015 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2015/12/250680.htm>.

- inclusive transition -- peaceful transition. He chose instead to slaughter people, and as a consequence, our view has been that you cannot bring peace to Syria, you cannot get an end to the civil war unless you have a government that is recognized as legitimate by a majority of that country. John Kerry is meeting as we speak with Syria and Turkey and Iran and the Gulf countries and other parties who are interested.<sup>911</sup>
- December 15, 2015 Sec. State Kerry changes the long held U.S. policy that Assad will have no role in a Syrian transition. He says, "The focus now is not on our differences about what can or cannot be done immediately about Assad. Rather, it is on facilitating a peace process in which Syrians will be making decisions for the future of Syria."<sup>912</sup>
- December 16, 2016 The U.S. and Russia join forces in drafting a U.N. Security Council resolution sanctioning entities that do business with terrorist groups, namely ISIS.<sup>913</sup>
- December 18, 2015 UN unanimously approves Resolution 2254 (2015), which constitutes a roadmap for peace in Syria.<sup>914</sup>
- Resolution 2254 (2015) the Council reconfirmed its endorsement of the 30 June 2012 Geneva Communiqué, and endorsed the "Vienna Statements" in pursuit of the Communiqué's implementation as the basis for a Syrian-led, Syrian-owned political transition to end the conflict.<sup>915</sup>
- December 21, 2015 UN Amb. Power announces that Pres. Obama plans to host a high-level summit at next year's General Assembly during

<sup>911</sup> Barack Obama, "Press Conference by the President, 12/18/15," Briefing, December 18, 2015 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/12/18/press-conference-president-121815>.

<sup>912</sup> Kellan Howell, "Kerry Changes Stance on Syria: U.S. Not Seeking Regime Change," *The Washington Times*, December 15, 2015, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/dec/16/kerry-changes-stance-syria-us-not-seeking-regime-cl/>.

<sup>913</sup> Somini Sengupta, "UN Council to Adopt Sanctions Against ISIS," *The New York Times*, December 16, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/17/world/middleeast/un-council-to-adopt-sanctions-against-isis.html?ref=topics>.

<sup>914</sup> John Kerry, "Remarks at the United Nations Security Council Meeting on Syria," Remarks, December 18, 2015 (online by U.S. Mission to the United Nations), <http://usun.state.gov/remarks/7063>.

<sup>915</sup> Security Council Unanimously Adopts Resolution 2254 (2015), Endorsing Road Map for Peace Process in Syria, Setting Timetable for Talks, *United Nations Security Council*, December 1, 2015, [www.un.org/press/en/2015/sec1271.doc.htm](http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sec1271.doc.htm)

- high-level week focused on the global refugee crisis.<sup>916</sup>
- December 28, 2015 Iraqi troops retake most of Ramadi, seven months after the city fell to ISIS forces.<sup>917</sup>
- January 5, 2016 2015 U.S.-led Coalition spokesman U.S. Army Col. Steve Warren announces that, “ISIS territory shrank by 40 percent from its maximum expansion in Iraq, and by 20 percent in Syria in 2015, as international forces pushed it out of several cities.”<sup>918</sup>
- January 11, 2016 Sec. Kerry speaks by phone with Russian FM Lavrov, discussing Syria political process, the fight against DAESH, and Middle East region, amongst other things.<sup>919</sup>
- January 13, 2016 Sec. Carter discusses goals for 2016 for the United States’ fight against ISIL. He says that the campaign will focus on collapsing ISIL’s control of Raqqa in Syria and Mosul in Iraq. He mentions that he ordered the most elite U.S. special operations forces to go into Syria to support the fight against ISIL.<sup>920</sup>
- January 13, 2016 Former Sec. Hagel says that the “we [the US] have allowed ourselves to get caught and paralyzed on our Syria policy by the statement that ‘Assad must go’.”<sup>921</sup>
- January 13, 2016 U.N. Special Envoy de Mistura says that Syria peace talks are scheduled for January 25, 2016 in Geneva. His office releases a statement saying, “The Special Envoy and his team

<sup>916</sup> Samantha Power, “Remarks at the Security Council Stakeout Following Consultations on the Middle East,” Remarks, December 21, 2015 (online by U.S. Mission to the United Nations), <http://usun.state.gov/remarks/7069>.

<sup>917</sup> Falih Hassan and Sewell Chan, “Iraqi Victory Over ISIS in Ramadi Could Prove Pivotal,” *The New York Times*, December 28, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/29/world/middleeast/iraq-ramadi-isis.html>.

<sup>918</sup> Stephen Kalin and Maher Chmaytelli, “Islamic State Territory Shrinks in Iraq and Syria: U.S.- Led Coalition,” *Reuters*, January 5, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-islamicstate-idUSKBN0UJ17F20160105>.

<sup>919</sup> “Secretary Kerry’s Phone Call With Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov,” Press Release, January 11, 2016 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/01/251087.htm>.

<sup>920</sup> Ashton Carter, “Remarks to the 101st Airborne Division on the Counter-ISIL Campaign Plan,” Speech, January 13, 2016 (online by U.S. Department of Defense), <http://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech-View/Article/642995/counter-isil-campaign-plan-remarks>.

<sup>921</sup> Aaron Mehta, “Hagel: US ‘Paralyzed’ in Syria by Assad Focus,” *Defense News*, January 13, 2016, <http://www.defensenews.com/story/war-in-syria/2016/01/13/hagel-us-paralyzed-syria-assad-focus/78769202/>.

- will continue working hard to issue the invitations in order to ensure maximum inclusivity, with a view to starting the intra-Syrian Geneva Talks on 25 January.<sup>922</sup>
- January 14, 2016 Sec. Kerry tells Syrian Opposition that U.S. support for the group could be reduced if it doesn't attend upcoming peace conference in Geneva.<sup>923</sup>
- January 20, 2016 Sec. Kerry and Russian FM Lavrov meet in Zurich in an effort to reconcile difference over what countries and organizations will be represented at upcoming international Syrian peace talks to be held in Geneva later during the week. The meetings adjourn with no tangible progress having been made. The Russian delegations were seeking to include more opposition factions, including the Kurdish PYD, in the talks.<sup>924</sup>
- January 25, 2016 The Syria peace talks ,scheduled to begin on Monday, January 25 are pushed back to Friday, January 29.<sup>925</sup>
- January 26, 2016 UN Special Envoy de Mistura sends invitations to the delayed talks on Tuesday, without saying who had been invited or how many groups might participate. A decision by the opposition's recently formed High Negotiations Committee (HNC) on whether to accept the invitation is due to be taken at a meeting in Riyadh.<sup>926</sup>
- January 26, 2016 Turkish FM Mevlut Cavusoglu says that Turkey will boycott Geneva meetings if the PYD is invited.<sup>927</sup>

<sup>922</sup> Tom Miles and Stephanie Nebehay, "U.N. envoy says Syria peace talks still on for January 25," *Reuters*, January 13, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-un-idUSKCN0UR2MJ20160113>.

<sup>923</sup> Michael R. Gordon, "Kerry Urges Syrian Rebels to Go to Peace Meeting," *The New York Times*, January 14, 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/15/world/middleeast/us-preses-syrian-opposition-to-join-talks.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/15/world/middleeast/us-preses-syrian-opposition-to-join-talks.html?_r=0).

<sup>924</sup> Anne Barnard, "Squabbles Persist Over Who Should Be at Syria Peace Talks," *The New York Times*, January 20, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/21/world/middleeast/syria-peace-talks-john-kerry-sergey-lavrov.html?ref=topics>.

<sup>925</sup> "Syria talks to seek ceasefire, excluding ISIL and Nusra," *Al Jazeera*, January 25, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/01/syria-peace-talks-postponed-january-160125131356951.html>.

<sup>926</sup> Suleiman Al-Khalidi, Tom Perry, and Tom Miles, "U.N. invites warring parties to Syria talks this week," *Reuters*, January 26, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-opposition-idUSKCN0V40MJ>.

<sup>927</sup> Ali Unal, "If PYD Is Invited to Syria Peace Talks, Turkey Will Boycott the Meeting," *Daily Sabah*, January 26, 2016, <http://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2016/01/26/fm-cavusoglu-if-pyd-is-invited-to-syria-peace-talks-turkey-will-boycott-the-meetings>.

- January 26, 2016      Amb. Power comments on the state of besieged areas in Syria, specifically Madaya. She says, "The conditions are particularly abysmal in besieged areas, where, according to the UN, nearly 400,000 people are waging a daily struggle to merely survive."<sup>928</sup>
- January 27, 2016      Speaking to the decision of the U.N. not to invite Kurdish PYD forces to peace talks in Geneva, State Dept. Spokesperson Mark Toner says in a briefing, "The exclusion of the PYD, at least in this initial round of talks, was a decision taken by de Mistura and his people and it was partly a reflection of, again, these meetings to define the Syrian opposition and to basically choose who among the Syrian opposition would represent them going forward in these talks, and we respect that process."<sup>929</sup>
- January 27, 2016      UN Amb. Power remarks at the Security Council stakeout following consultations on Syria, "Syria is in what he called "a race against time."<sup>930</sup>
- January 29, 2016      The Syrian opposition announces that it will send a team to Geneva, though it does not commit to attending the peace talks with the Syrian government.<sup>931</sup> The opposition says they will stand by their demand for an end to air-strikes and blockades before they will negotiate with the Syrian government.<sup>932</sup>
- January 31, 2016      Special Envoy McGurk crosses into the Kurdish-held north of Syria to meet with Kurdish officials and fighters battling the ISIS. This was the first known visit to Syria by a senior U.S. official since the ambassador, Robert Ford, departed

<sup>928</sup> Samantha Power, "Remarks at a UN Security Council Open Debate on the Middle East," Remarks, January 26, 2016 (online by U.S. Mission to the United Nations), <http://usun.state.gov/remarks/7106>.

<sup>929</sup> Mark Toner, Daily Press Briefing, January 27, 2016 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2016/01/251728.htm>.

<sup>930</sup> Samantha Power, "Remarks at the Security Council Stakeout Following Consultations on Syria," Remarks, January 27, 2016 (online by U.S. Mission to the United Nations), <http://usun.state.gov/remarks/7110>.

<sup>931</sup> Liz Sly and Karen DeYoung, "Opposition will send team to Syria talks but has not agreed to participate," *The Washington Post*, January 29, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/syria-peace-talks-open-in-disarray-with-opposition-groups-staying-away/2016/01/29/c1cc02b0-c607-11e5-b933-31c93021392a\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/syria-peace-talks-open-in-disarray-with-opposition-groups-staying-away/2016/01/29/c1cc02b0-c607-11e5-b933-31c93021392a_story.html).

<sup>932</sup> "Syria conflict: Opposition sets terms for Geneva peace talks," *BBC News*, January 31, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35452640>.

- the capital, Damascus, in 2012.<sup>933</sup>
- February 1, 2016 The U.N. announces the official start to the Syria peace talks in Geneva.<sup>934</sup>
- February 2-3, 2016 Sec. Kerry travels to Rome to lead the U.S. delegation to the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL Small Group Ministerial. Secretary Kerry then travels to London to lead the U.S. delegation to the Fourth Syria Donors Conference.<sup>935</sup>
- February 3, 2016 Sec. Kerry issues a statement supporting a peaceful resolution to the Syrian Crisis.<sup>936</sup>
- February 3, 2016 The Syrian regime with Russian air support begins a major offensive in Aleppo, complicating the peace talks in Geneva.<sup>937</sup>
- February 3, 2016 UN Special Envoy de Mistura announces that he has temporarily suspended the Syria peace talks.<sup>938</sup>
- February 4, 2016 World leaders meet at a donor conference in London and pledge over \$10 billion in aid for Syria. Sec. Kerry represents the U.S. at the conference. He says, "So today the United States is announcing our latest contribution, which is over \$925 million. That includes more than 600 million in direct humanitarian aid to provide food, shelter, water, medical care, and other vital relief to millions of people inside of Syria and across the region. It also includes 325 million in development assistance, 290 million of which is new funding

<sup>933</sup> Liz Sly, "US Envoy Goes to Syria to Press the Fight Against the Islamic State," *The Washington Post*, January 31, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/us-envoy-goes-to-syria-to-press-the-fight-against-the-islamic-state/2016/01/31/7cd39aaf-b44e-467c-97e9-a365c-627fa31\\_story.html?tid=a\\_inl](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/us-envoy-goes-to-syria-to-press-the-fight-against-the-islamic-state/2016/01/31/7cd39aaf-b44e-467c-97e9-a365c-627fa31_story.html?tid=a_inl).

<sup>934</sup> Tom Miles, John Irish, Tom Perry and Arshad Mohammed, "U.N. announces start of Syria peace talks as government troops advance," *Reuters*, February 1, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-idUSKCN0VA2OT>.

<sup>935</sup> John Kerry, "Remarks at the Ministerial Meeting of the Small Group of the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL," Remarks, February 2, 2016 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2016/02/251992.htm>.

<sup>936</sup> John Kerry, "Supporting a Peaceful Resolution to the Syrian Crisis," Statement, February 3, 2016 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2016/02/252110.htm>.

<sup>937</sup> Nick Cumming-Bruce, "New Offensive by Assad's Forces Overshadows Syria Peace Talks," *The New York Times*, February 2, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/03/world/middleeast/new-offensive-by-assads-forces-overshadows-syria-peace-talks.html>.

<sup>938</sup> Nick Cumming-Bruce and Somini Sengupta, "Syria Talks Are Suspended," *The New York Times*, February 3, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/04/world/middleeast/syria-peace-talks-geneva-de-mistura.html?ref=world>.

- specifically to support schooling for 300,000 refugee youth in Jordan and Lebanon – meeting directly, hopefully, the challenge that we face here today.”<sup>939</sup>
- February 4, 2016 Syrian government forces continue to advance on Aleppo with Russian air support, displacing thousands of civilians.<sup>940</sup>
- February 6, 2016 Tens of thousands of Syrian refugees flee a Russia-backed government offensive in the Syrian city of Aleppo.<sup>941</sup>
- February 10, 2016 Special Envoy McGurk testifies before the House Foreign Affairs Committee on the threat posed by ISIL in Iraq, Syria, and Libya. Recently returning from the region where he met with Syrian Kurdish groups in rebel-controlled territory, he cited progress in reducing the oil output of ISIS due to U.S. and allied airstrikes, as well as Turkey’s efforts to secure its border with Syria in order to reduce the flow of foreign fighters and supplies. He also discussed the humanitarian and Syrian refugee situation, efforts to counter ISIS messaging on social media and the role of other countries in the region to aid in the conflict. <sup>942</sup>
- February 11-12, 2016 The International Syria Support Group (ISSG) meets in Munich. The member countries decide that humanitarian access will commence this week to besieged areas, and that an ISSG task force will within one week elaborate modalities for a nationwide cessation of hostilities. The ISSG members unanimously commit to immediately facilitate the full implementation of the UN Security Council Resolution 2254, adopted unanimously December 18, 2015.<sup>943</sup>
- February 11, 2016 Sec. Kerry and Russian FM Lavrov announce that they agreed on the delivery over the next few days of desperately

<sup>939</sup> John Kerry, “Remarks at the Syria Donors Conference,” Remarks, February 4, 2016 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2016/02/252121.htm>.

<sup>940</sup> Ben Hubbard, “Government Forces, Backed by Russian Jets, Advance in Syria,” *The New York Times*, February 4, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/05/world/middleeast/saudis-suggest-a-syria-ground-operation-led-by-us-and-its-allies.html>.

<sup>941</sup> Mehmet Emin Caliskan, Lisa Barrington, and Humeyra Pamuk, “Syrians flee to Turkish border as Aleppo assault intensifies,” *Reuters*, February 6, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-idUSKCN0VF087>.

<sup>942</sup> Brett McGurk, Testimony Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, February 10, 2016, <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA00/20160210/104449/HHRG-114-FA00-Wstate-McGurkB-20160210.pdf>.

<sup>943</sup> “Statement of the International Syria Support Group,” Statement, February 11, 2016 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/02/252428.htm>.

- needed aid to besieged Syrian cities, to be followed by a “cessation of hostilities” within a week.<sup>944</sup>
- February 12, 2016 Sec. Kerry holds a joint press conference with Russian FM Lavrov at the International Syria Support Group meeting in Munich. Kerry applauds the progress made in Munich on the humanitarian front and the cessation of hostilities, which will apply to all parties in Syria with the exception of the terrorist organizations such as ISIS and Nusra. He states that the ISSG agreed upon the need to work with Russia in an effort to guarantee that the access is provided and that the cessation of hostilities actually takes hold.<sup>945</sup>
- February 15, 2016 Amb. Susan Rice says that Russia’s intensified campaign in Syria “does call into question Russia’s willingness or ability to implement the agreements achieved in Munich.”<sup>946</sup>
- February 15, 2016 The U.S. condemns airstrikes conducted in and around Aleppo against civilian targets, including two hospitals in Azaz city. Russia claims the U.S. is responsible for the bombings.<sup>947</sup>
- February 15, 2016 German Chanc. Merkel calls for the formation of no fly zone in Syria.<sup>948</sup>
- February 15, 2016 Senator John McCain says of Russian Pres. Putin at the Munich Security Conference, “He [Putin] wants to exacerbate the refugee crisis and use it as a weapon to divide the transatlantic alliance and undermine the European project. The only thing that has changed about Mr. Putin’s ambitions is that his appetite is growing with the eating.”<sup>949</sup>
- February 17, 2016 UN Special Envoy de Mistura says the Syrian government has

<sup>944</sup> David Sanger, “U.S. and Russia Announce Plan for Humanitarian Aid and a Cease-Fire in Syria,” *The New York Times*, February 11, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/12/world/middleeast/us-and-russia-announce-plan-for-humanitarian-aid-and-a-cessation-of-hostilities.html?ref=world>.

<sup>945</sup> John Kerry, “Press Availability at the International Syria Support Group,” Remarks, February 12, 2016 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2016/02/252431.htm>.

<sup>946</sup> Susan Rice, “Press Briefing by Principal Deputy Press Secretary Eric Schultz,” Briefing, February 15, 2016 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/02/15/press-briefing-principal-deputy-press-secretary-eric-schultz>.

<sup>947</sup> John Kirby, “Airstrikes in Northern Syria,” Press Release, February 15, 2016 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/02/252503.htm>.

<sup>948</sup> Michelle Martin, “Merkel says supports some kind of no-fly zone in Syria,” *Reuters*, February 15, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-merkel-no-fly-idUSKCN0VO1ZH>.

<sup>949</sup> Tim Hume, “McCain slams Russia: ‘Mr. Putin is not interested in being our partner’,” *CNN*, February 15, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/02/14/middleeast/syria-russia-u-s-turkey/>.

- approved access to seven besieged areas and UN convoys are expected to travel to them within days after meeting with with Syria's Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem in Damascus.<sup>950</sup>
- February 22, 2016 Pres. Obama speaks with Russian Pres. Putin by phone to discuss efforts to establish a nation-wide cessation of hostilities between the Syrian regime and its allies on the one hand and the armed opposition on the other. Pres. Obama welcomes that an understanding was reached between the United States, Russia, as well as other partners in the International Syria Support Group on the terms and modalities for such a cessation of hostilities. He also emphasizes that the priority now was to ensure positive responses by the Syrian regime and armed opposition as well as faithful implementation by all parties in order to alleviate the suffering of the Syrian people, galvanize UN-led political process, and focus on defeating ISIL.<sup>951</sup>
- February 22, 2016 Sec. Kerry says he and Russian FM Lavrov had reached a provisional agreement on terms of a cessation of hostilities in Syria and the sides are closer to a ceasefire than ever before.<sup>952</sup>
- February 22, 2016 Sec. Kerry announces the cessation of hostilities agreement at a press conference in Washington.<sup>953</sup>
- February 22, 2016 President Obama speaks by phone with President Vladimir Putin of Russia at the Kremlin's request to discuss efforts to establish a nation-wide cessation of hostilities between the Syrian regime and its allies on the one hand and the armed opposition on the other. suffering of the Syrian people, galvanize UN-led political process, and focus on defeating ISIL.<sup>954</sup>

<sup>950</sup> "Syria 'approves' aid access to seven besieged areas," *Al Jazeera*, February 17, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/02/russia-rejects-war-crimes-accusation-syria-at-tacks-160216175121002.html>.

<sup>951</sup> "Readout of the President's Call with President Vladimir Putin of Russia," Press Release, February 22, 2016 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/02/22/readout-presidents-call-president-vladimir-putin-russia>.

<sup>952</sup> Arshad Mohammed and Tom Perry, "Syrian rebels see flaws in U.S.-Russian truce plan," *Reuters*, February 22, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-draft-idUSKCN0VV1NJ>.

<sup>953</sup> John Kerry, "Cessation of Hostilities in Syria," Statement, February 22, 2016 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2016/02/253117.htm>.

<sup>954</sup> "Readout of the President's Call with President Vladimir Putin of Russia," Press Release, February 22, 2016 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/02/22/readout-presidents-call-president-vladimir-putin-russia>.

- February 23, 2016 The Syrian government says that it has accepted a proposed truce in the country, adding that operations would nevertheless continue against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and al Qaeda's branch in Syria. A Foreign Ministry statement on Tuesday says government forces would have the right to respond to any violation carried out by insurgents.<sup>955</sup>
- February 23, 2016 Pres. Obama speaks via video conference with heads of state from Germany, France, and Britain about the agreement to end hostilities in Syria. The leaders "called on all parties to implement it faithfully," and "underscored the importance of an immediate halt to the indiscriminate bombing of civilian populations," the White House said in a statement.<sup>956</sup>
- February 23, 2016 Sec. Kerry testifies before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee regarding the delivery of humanitarian aid in Syria. He says "We have the opportunity to put to the test their commitment to a political solution. If this doesn't end and the opposition continues to fight, this could get a lot uglier. The Russians have to consider that, too."<sup>957</sup>
- February 24, 2016 Sec. Kerry says it would take 15,000 to 30,000 ground troops to maintain a safe zone inside northern Syria, citing previously unheard estimates provided by the Pentagon.<sup>958</sup>
- February 25, 2016 Press Sec. Earnest reiterates the White House's position that "the core of solving this problem involves bringing about a long-overdue political transition inside of Syria."<sup>959</sup>

<sup>955</sup> "Syrian regime agrees to truce deal," *CBS News*, February 23, 2016, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/syria-bashar-assad-cease-fire-but-isis-nusra-war-russia/>.

<sup>956</sup> "Readout of the President's Video Conference with British Prime Minister David Cameron, French President Francois Hollande, and German Chancellor Angela Merkel," Press Release, February 23, 2016 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/02/23/readout-presidents-video-conference-british-prime-minister-david-cameron>.

<sup>957</sup> Oren Dorell, "Kerry warns of 'Plan B' in Syria if cease-fire fails," *USA Today*, February 23, 2016, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2016/02/23/kerry-warns-plan-b-syria-if-cease-fire-fails/80810158/>.

<sup>958</sup> Justin Fishel, "Up to 30,000 Troops Needed for Syria Safe Zone, Kerry Says," *ABC News*, February 24, 2016, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/30000-troops-needed-syria-safe-zone-kerry/story?id=37173697>.

<sup>959</sup> Josh Earnest, "Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 2/25/2016," Press Release, February 25, 2016 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/02/25/press-briefing-press-secretary-josh-earnest-2252016>.

- February 26, 2016 UN Amb. Power says Resolution 2268 adopted by the U.N. Security Council to endorse the cessation of hostilities in Syria “offers a genuine opportunity to pause, at least in part, the fighting in one of the most brutal conflicts the world has seen in a generation.” She cites continued concern for Syria and Russia’s continued airstrikes throughout Syria, but is hopeful that the cessation of hostilities will allow UN Special Envoy de Mistura to reconvene talks in Geneva for a political solution.<sup>960</sup>
- February 27, 2016: The ceasefire agreement brokered by the United States and Russia goes into effect.
- February 27, 2016 Pres. Obama states in his weekly address that the only way to defeat ISIL is to end the civil war in Syria. He says the ceasefire meant to take effect this weekend will be critical and adds, “We’re not under any illusions. There are plenty of reasons for skepticism.” He emphasizes that there will be no ceasefire against ISIL.<sup>961</sup>
- February 29, 2016 State Dept. Deputy Spokesperson Toner reiterates that he has no details about the “Plan B” for Syria if the ceasefire fails.<sup>962</sup>
- March 11, 2016 Sec. State Kerry travels to Saudi Arabia to meet with senior Saudi officials to discuss efforts to resolve the Syrian and Yemeni crisis<sup>963</sup>.
- March 13, 2016 Sec. Kerry, during a joint press conference with his counterparts from France, Germany, the U.K., EU, and Italy discusses the International Syria Support group and the cessation of hostilities agreement. “Now, the diplomatic process that has been launched by the International Syria Support Group has enabled us to move forward in two critical areas. I mentioned one, the reduction of violence. But it has made possible the delivery of emergency sup-

<sup>960</sup> Samantha Power, “Explanation of Vote at the Adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2268 on the Cessation of Hostilities in Syria,” Remarks, February 26, 2016 (online by U.S. Mission to the United Nations), <http://usun.state.gov/remarks/7156>.

<sup>961</sup> Barack Obama, “WEEKLY ADDRESS: Degrading and Destroying ISIL,” Remarks, February 27, 2016 (online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/02/27/weekly-address-degrading-and-destroying-isil>.

<sup>962</sup> Mark Toner, Daily Press Briefing, February 29, 2016 (online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2016/02/253784.htm>.

<sup>963</sup> John Kirby, “Secretary Kerry’s Travel to Saudi Arabia and France,” Press Release, March 10, 2016 (Online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/03/254590.htm>

- plies to communities inside Syria.<sup>964</sup>
- March 14, 2016 Russia announces that it will begin to withdraw its forces from Syria.<sup>965</sup> Pres. Obama speaks with Russian President Putin by phone. The two discuss developments in Syria, including the ongoing cessation of hostilities and Putin's announcement that day to withdraw Russian forces. Obama emphasized the U.S.'s stance that a political transition is required to end violence in Syria.<sup>966</sup>
- March 16, 2016 Sec. Kerry speaks on the phone with Russian FM Lavrov to stress the urgent need for a political transition in Syria. He also underscored the U.S. desire for maintaining the cessation of hostilities and providing of humanitarian access to Syrian populations in distress<sup>967</sup>.
- March 22, 2016 ISIS perpetrates a series of explosions at the Brussels airport and Maelbeek subway station<sup>968</sup>.
- March 23, 2016 Sec. Carter testifies before the House Armed Services Committee, stating that he is confident that the Islamic State will be defeated in both Iraq and Syria, adding "we have the momentum of the campaign." Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Joe Dunford, expressed agreement with Carter's sentiment, adding, "Since [October], [ISIL] not only have less territory, they have less resources, they have less freedom of movement."<sup>969</sup>

<sup>964</sup> John Kerry, "Remarks at the Joint Press Availability with French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond, EU High Representative Federica Mogherini, and Italian Foreign Minister Paolo Gentiloni," Remarks, March 13, 2016 (Online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2016/03/254644.htm>

<sup>965</sup> Holly Yan and Tim Hume, "Russia Begins Withdrawing Forces from Syria," *CNN*, March 15, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/03/15/world/russia-syria-withdrawal/>

<sup>966</sup> "Readout of the President's Call with President Vladimir Putin of Russia," Press Release, March 14, 2016 (Online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/03/14/readout-presidents-call-president-vladimir-putin-russia>

<sup>967</sup> John Kirby, "Readout of Secretary Kerry's Call with Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov," Press Release, March 16, 2016 (Online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/t/pa/prs/ps/2016/03/254770.htm>

<sup>968</sup> Victoria Shannon, "Brussels Attacks: What We Know and Don't Know," March 22, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/23/world/europe/brussels-attacks-what-we-know-and-dont-know.html>

<sup>969</sup> Jim Garamone, "Coalition Has Momentum in Fight Against ISIL, Carter, Dunford Say," *DoD News*, March 23, 2016, <http://www.defense.gov/News-Article-View/Article/702339/coalition-has-momentum-in-fight-against-isil-carter-dunford-say>

- March 23, 2016      Discussing Sec. Kerry's upcoming trip to Moscow, a Senior State Department Official says, "On Syria, as you know, with the cessation of hostilities going better than a lot of people expected – albeit with significant violations every day – it'll be a chance to evaluate where we are there."<sup>970</sup>
- March 22-24, 2016      Sec. Kerry travels to Moscow for meetings with Russian Pres. Putin and FM Lavrov. Sec. Kerry discussed Syria with both leaders. "It's fair to say, Mr. President, that the serious approach that we have been able to cooperate on has made a difference to the life of people in Syria and to the possibilities of making progress on peace," he told Pres. Putin<sup>971</sup>.
- March 24, 2016      The U.S. and Russia renew their commitment to strengthen the Syrian cease-fire during "marathon" talks in Moscow. The two sides agreed that negotiators from both the Syrian opposition and government must meet in Geneva and produce a "target schedule" for drafting a constitution and guidelines for a political transition to occur no later than August.<sup>972</sup>
- March 27, 2016      Syrian state forces report that they have retaken Palmyra from ISIS after a three week operation supported by Russian airstrikes<sup>973</sup>
- March 30, 2016      The U.S. announces, at a high-level UNHCR meeting in Geneva, that it will provide an additional \$10 million to the UNHCR towards aiding in identifying and resettling Syrian refugees.<sup>974</sup>
- March 30, 2016      White House Press Sec. Josh Earnest says, "it is impossible to imagine a scenario where the political turmoil and violence inside of Syria comes to an end while President Assad is still there," reiterating the administration's po-

<sup>970</sup> U.S. Department of State, "Briefing on Secretary Kerry's Travel to Moscow, Russia," Press Release, March 23, 2016 (Online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/tr/pa/prs/ps/2016/03/254981.htm>

<sup>971</sup> John Kerry, "Remarks with Russian President Vladimir Putin," Remarks, March 24, 2016 (Online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2016/03/255114.htm>

<sup>972</sup> Neil MacFarquhar, "Russia and the U.S. Agree to Try to Bolster Cease-Fire in Syria," *The New York Times*, March 24, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/25/world/europe/kerry-russia-talks.html>

<sup>973</sup> Erika Solomon, "Syrian Forces Retake Palmyra from ISIS," *Financial Times*, March 27, 2016, <https://next.ft.com/content/75ce4d64-f406-11e5-803c-d27c7117d132>

<sup>974</sup> U.S. Department of State, "The United States Announces Additional Pledges in Support of Syrian Refugees," Press Release, March 30, 2016 (Online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/tr/pa/prs/ps/2016/03/255304.htm>

- sition that Assad must step aside in order to achieve a resolution to the Syrian conflict.<sup>975</sup>
- March 31, 2016 The U.S. condemns an attack on Deir Al Asafir, Syria saying it is “appalled by aerial strikes March 31, reportedly by the Assad regime, on a school and hospital in the Damascus suburb of Deir Al Asafir, where more than 20 people are believed to have been killed and dozens were injured, including women, children, and first responders.”<sup>976</sup>
- April 1, 2016 Pres. Obama speaks at the closing session of the Nuclear Security Summit in Washington. He states that ISIL is losing ground in Syria and Iraq in terms of morale, oil infrastructure and revenues, and flow of foreign fighters. He adds, “as ISIL is squeezed in Syria and Iraq, we can anticipate it lashing out elsewhere.”<sup>977</sup>
- April 5th, 2016 Sec. Kerry appears on PBS’s Charlie Rose. Rose quotes General Petraeus’ sentiment that, “if we’re not winning we’re losing,” asking Sec. Kerry if the U.S. is losing the fight against ISIS. The Sec. responds, “No, we’re distinctly not. That I believe very deeply. We are aggressively making progress with respect to ISIL, Daesh.”<sup>978</sup>
- April 6, 2016 White House Press Sec. Earnest says efforts to destroy the Islamic State have been effective in decreasing the number of foreign fighters traveling to Iraq and Syria, enhancing the capabilities of local forces to fight the Islamic State, and pushing the Islamic State off of previously-held territory.<sup>979</sup>
- April 12, 2016 US Rep. to the UN Samantha Power expresses strong distrust toward statements from the Syrian regime and Rus-

<sup>975</sup> Josh Earnest, “Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest,” Press Release, March 30, 2016 (Online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/03/31/press-briefing-press-secretary-josh-earnest-3302016>

<sup>976</sup> John Kirby, “Attacks in Deir Al Asafir, Syria,” Press Release, March 31, 2016 (Online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/03/255386.htm>

<sup>977</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by President Obama at the Closing Session of the Nuclear Security Summit,” Remarks, April 1, 2016 (Online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/04/01/remarks-president-obama-closing-session-nuclear-security-summit>

<sup>978</sup> Samantha Power, “Remarks Following a UN Security Council Meeting on Humanitarian Access to Besieged Areas in Syria,” Remarks, April 5, 2016 (Online by the United States Mission to the United Nations), <http://usun.state.gov/remarks/7214>

<sup>979</sup> Josh Earnest, “Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest,” Press Release, April 6, 2016 (Online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/04/07/press-briefing-press-secretary-josh-earnest-462016>

- sia that they have only been targeting terrorists, calling the claims “ludicrous.”<sup>980</sup>
- April 13, 2016 Pres. Obama calls the negotiated ceasefire in Syria “tenuous” and emphasizes that talks on a political solution in Syria “must include a transition away” from Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.<sup>981</sup>
- April 14, 2016 State Dept. Press Sec. Kirby announces that the U.S. has pledged \$421 million in aid the the UNHCR.<sup>982</sup>
- April 15, 2016 Sec. Kerry speaks by phone with Russian FM Lavrov to reiterate U.S. concerns about the stability of the cessation of hostilities in Syria.<sup>983</sup>
- April 18, 2016 Rebel groups in Syria, including Ahrar al-Sham, Jaysh al-Islam, and several other groups under the Free Syrian Army umbrella declare that their intent to wage an offensive against government forces after multiple alleged truce violations on the part of the government.<sup>984</sup>
- April 19, 2016 The main Syrian opposition group, the High Negotiations Committee (HNC), has left Geneva in protest of the continued violence in Syria, a day after suspending their participation in the talks.<sup>985</sup>
- April 22, 2016 Pres. Obama holds a joint press conference with British Prime Minister David Cameron, in which Obama says he has always been skeptical of Russian President Putin’s “actions and motives inside of Syria.” He continues, “we cannot end the crisis in Syria without political negotiations and without getting all the parties around the table to craft a transition plan.”

<sup>980</sup> Samantha Power, “Remarks Following UN Security Council Consultations on Syria, Remarks, April 12, 2016 (Online by United States Mission to the United Nations), <http://usun.state.gov/remarks/7220>

<sup>981</sup> Carol Lee, “Obama Describes Syrian Cease-Fire as ‘Tenuous,’” *The Wall Street Journal*, April 13, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/obama-describes-syrian-cess-fire-as-tenuous-1460591700>

<sup>982</sup> John Kirby, “The United States Contributed \$421 Million to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees,” Press Release, April 14, 2016 (Online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/04/255835.htm>

<sup>983</sup> John Kirby, “Readout of Secretary Kerry’s Phone Call with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov,” Press Release, April 15, 2016 (Online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/04/255870.htm>

<sup>984</sup> “Syria Conflict: Rebels Vow Retaliatory Attacks Against Government,” *BBC*, April 18, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36071608>

<sup>985</sup> Rua’a Alameri & Ammar Aziz, “Lack of ‘Pressure’ on Syria Regime as Truce Fails,” *al Arabiya English*, April 19, 2016, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2016/04/19/Syrian-truce-crumbles-as-Russia-urges-more-peace-talks.html>

- He also states that the cessation of hostilities has endured longer than he expected and that he has spoken with President Putin to pressure Assad to maintain this ceasefire.<sup>986</sup>
- April 24, 2016 Pres. Obama says that his objection to a safe zone in Syria is a practical, not ideological, objection, with concerns of whose troops would ensure it, how people would be let in, and how it would be monitored.<sup>987</sup>
- April 26, 2016 The White House states that President Obama would consider sending more Special Operations forces to Syria if the deployment of 250 additional personnel is successful.<sup>988</sup>
- April 28, 2016 Sec. Carter testifies before the Senate Armed Services Committee that the U.S. has made effective moves in the last year's fight against the Islamic State, including the decision to base additional aircraft in Turkey.<sup>989</sup>
- Sec. Kerry insinuates that Bashar al-Assad is a war criminal, saying "I believe there is strong evidence to that effect, and at some point, obviously, there could well be a reckoning with respect to that." Kerry also insists that the Kremlin had played a constructive role in some regards in Syria,
- April 28, 2016 The State Department condemns airstrikes in Aleppo on the al-Quds hospital, was was operating under the support of both Doctors Without Borders and the Red cross. Spokesperson Kirby also said that, "Russia has an urgent responsibility to press the regime to fulfill its commitments under UNSCR 2254, including in particular to stop attacking civilians, medical facilities, and first responders, and to abide fully by the cessation of hostilities."<sup>990</sup>

<sup>986</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Cameron in Joint Press Conference," Remarks, April 22, 2016 (Online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/04/22/remarks-president-obama-and-prime-minister-cameron-joint-press>

<sup>987</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks by President Obama and Chancellor Merkel in Joint Press Conference," Remarks, April 24, 2016 (Online by the White House Office of the Press Secretary), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/04/24/remarks-president-obama-and-chancellor-merkel-joint-press-conference>

<sup>988</sup> Jordan Fabian, "Obama Open to Sending More Troops to Syria," *The Hill*, April 26, 2016, <http://thehill.com/homenews/administration/277682-obama-open-to-sending-more-troops-to-syria>

<sup>989</sup> Halimah Abdullah, "Sec. Carter: Military Personnel in 'Combat'," *NBC News*, April 29, 2016, <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/sec-carter-defends-u-s-strategy-defeating-isis-n564266>

<sup>990</sup> John Kerry, "Attack on al-Quds Hospital in Aleppo, Syria," Press Release, April 28, 2016 (Online by U.S. Department of State), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2016/04/256697.htm>

















**T**he Syrian conflict that began as a revolution quickly descended into a major humanitarian disaster with the Assad regime's increasing use of force and the militarization of the dispute between the regime and the opposition. The country is witnessing a gloomy reality on the ground and there is little evidence to suggest any breakthrough in the near future. The ever-growing death toll, thousands of documented cases of war crimes and systematic torture, the use of weapons of mass destruction and the rise of radical groups have all failed to stir a robust American response. This book provides a synopsis of the past four years of U.S. policy in Syria. It brings together the major turning points of this policy since the beginning of the Arab Spring.

