

Syrian Revolution and Its Impact on US Foreign Policy

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Abstract

This article offers a comprehensive examination of the Syrian Revolution (2011-present) and its profound impact on United States foreign policy. Specifically, this study delves into the military and economic involvement of the United States in the conflict, analyzing the responses of both President Barack Obama and President Donald Trump to the evolving crisis in Syria. Furthermore, the article critically compares and contrasts the implications and consequences of the Syrian Revolution to other post-9/11 conflicts, shedding light on the unique dynamics of this particular uprising. Through an extensive review of academic literature, policy reports, and primary sources, this study highlights the multifaceted nature of US engagement in the Syrian Revolution. It explores the strategic motivations behind the United States' military intervention, including its objectives to counter terrorism, protect regional allies, and address the humanitarian crisis. Moreover, the economic aspects of US involvement, such as sanctions and aid, are analyzed to provide a holistic understanding of the United States' role in shaping the trajectory of the Syrian Revolution. This article also presents a comparative analysis of the responses of President Obama and President Trump to the Syrian crisis, unveiling distinct shifts in US foreign policy approaches. It explores the diplomatic, military, and humanitarian strategies pursued by the two administrations and assesses their effectiveness in resolving the conflict and advancing US national interests. Finally, this study offers a nuanced comparison of the impact and ramifications of the Syrian Revolution in relation to other post-9/11 conflicts. By drawing on contextual factors, geopolitical considerations, and regional dynamics, it elucidates the unique challenges and opportunities that the Syrian Revolution has presented to US foreign policy. The findings of this article contribute to the scholarly understanding of the Syrian Revolution and its underlying implications for US foreign policy. They also offer policymakers and analysts valuable insights into the complex interplay between domestic and international factors shaping US responses to conflicts in the Middle East and beyond.

Keywords: US modern history, politics, foreign affairs, military, modern military history.

1. Introduction

The Syrian revolution began as a peaceful protest movement in March 2011, calling for democratic reforms, human rights, and an end to the authoritarian regime of President Bashar al-Assad. However, the government's brutal crackdown on dissenters and protesters quickly escalated into a full-scale civil war, drawing in a complex web of regional and global actors. The United States has played a pivotal role in the Syrian conflict, initially supporting anti-government rebels and calling for Assad's removal from power, and then shifting its focus to fighting ISIS while maintaining a limited military presence in the country. Considering these developments, this article seeks to examine how the Syrian revolution has impacted US foreign policy.

2. Background

The Syrian revolution broke out in March 2011 as part of the broader wave of Arab uprisings known as the Arab Spring. It aimed to end President Bashar al-Assad's oppressive regime that had been in power for decades. The Syrian people were inspired by a wave of protests across the Middle East and North Africa, which resulted in the fall of longtime authoritarian leaders in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. However, the Syrian conflict proved more complex and intractable than others because of its sectarian and ethnic divisions, regional and international involvement, and the regime's ruthless response to peaceful protests.

2.1 *The Obama Administration response*

In the initial stages of the Syrian conflict, the Obama administration initially called for a political transition, expressing support for the Syrian people's aspirations for democracy and human rights. The administration provided non-lethal aid to opposition forces, such as communications equipment and medical supplies, and offered humanitarian support to alleviate the suffering of vulnerable populations affected by the conflict.

However, as the conflict escalated, the administration faced a difficult decision about how to intervene in the conflict. Direct military intervention was ruled out due to the lessons learned from the Iraq War, but the administration pursued a strategy of supporting moderate rebel groups and diplomatically pressuring Russia and Iran to put pressure on Assad to step down. The United States also condemned Assad's use of chemical weapons and supported efforts to hold him accountable for war crimes.

As the conflict in Syria continued, the Obama administration tried to use diplomatic channels to resolve the crisis. In 2012, the administration proposed the Geneva Communiqué, which called for a peaceful transition of power to a transitional governing body in Syria. The United States also worked with other countries, such as Russia and Iran, to try to find a political solution to the conflict.

However, the administration faced criticism for not taking more direct action to support the opposition and protect civilians. In 2013, when the Assad regime used chemical weapons against its own people, the administration considered military intervention but ultimately decided to pursue a diplomatic solution. The administration worked with Russia to broker a deal for Syria to relinquish its chemical weapons, which was seen as a diplomatic victory.

The administration also faced challenges in determining which opposition groups to support, as some rebel groups had ties to extremist organizations like al-Qaeda. In 2014, the administration launched a program to train and equip moderate opposition forces, but the program was widely criticized for its slow progress and lack of impact on the ground.

Ultimately, the Obama administration's response to the Syrian conflict was marked by a sense of caution and a reluctance to become too deeply involved in another military conflict in the Middle East. The administration's focus on fighting ISIS in Syria and Iraq was seen as a shift away from efforts to seek a political solution to the conflict in Syria. The administration's strategy proved ineffective, and Assad's forces regained ground as jihadist groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) gained more prominence. In 2015, the administration shifted its focus to fighting ISIS and formed a coalition with regional and global partners to conduct airstrikes against the group in Syria.

2.2 Trump Administration's response

The Trump administration took a more confrontational approach to Syria and Iran, aligning with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates and withdrawing from the nuclear deal with Iran. The administration authorized military strikes against Assad's forces twice in 2017 and 2018, following allegations of chemical weapons use. In April 2017, the United States launched 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles against a Syrian airbase in response to a chemical attack. In April 2018, the United States, along with the United Kingdom and France, launched airstrikes targeting Syrian government facilities involved in the production of chemical weapons.

The Trump administration also took a more aggressive stance towards ISIS, increasing the number of US troops in the country, and pursuing a policy of maximum pressure against the group. The administration's revised strategy aimed to eradicate ISIS and other terrorist groups in Syria, establish safe zones for civilians, and create conditions for a political solution to the conflict. The administration also invested more resources in working with regional allies to counter Iran's influence in Syria.

In addition to the airstrikes authorized against Assad's forces, the Trump administration also increased its support for Syrian opposition groups involved in the conflict. The administration authorized the transfer of anti-tank missiles to rebel groups and pledged to provide them with more military aid. The administration also imposed economic sanctions on Syria and its allies, including Russia and Iran, to put pressure on the Assad regime. In 2018, the administration announced new sanctions on individuals and entities involved in the production and distribution of chemical weapons in Syria.

The Trump administration pursued a policy of "realpolitik" in Syria, prioritizing the defeat of ISIS over the ousting of Assad from power. The administration argued that removing Assad from power would create a power vacuum that could be exploited by extremist groups such as ISIS.

The Trump administration also engaged in diplomatic efforts to try to resolve the conflict in Syria. In January 2018, the administration hosted a summit in Sochi, Russia, between representatives from the Syrian government and opposition. The administration also worked with Russia and Jordan to establish a ceasefire in southern Syria in July 2017.

The Trump administration's policy towards Syria was criticized by some for being inconsistent and lacking a long-term strategy. Critics argued that the administration's focus on defeating ISIS and countering Iran's influence in Syria did not address the root causes of the conflict and the humanitarian crisis in the country.

Despite the differences in approach between the Obama and Trump administrations, the Syrian conflict remains unresolved, with millions of Syrians displaced, ongoing violence and human rights abuses, and a political stalemate. The impact of the Syrian revolution on US foreign policy illustrates the complexity of the Middle East's geopolitics and the challenges of balancing regional and global interests.

3. United States's military involvement in Syria

The United States' primary focus in the conflict was counterterrorism and the fight against ISIS. In 2014, the United States formed a coalition with several other countries, including the United Kingdom, France, and Saudi Arabia, to launch airstrikes against ISIS targets in Syria and Iraq. These airstrikes targeted ISIS command centers, training camps, and weapon storage facilities, as well as oil refineries, which were a key source of funding for the extremist group.

As part of its counterterrorism efforts, the United States also provided training and equipment to local Syrian rebels. The US government funded and trained the New Syrian Army, a group of moderate Syrian rebels who were fighting both ISIS and the Syrian government. The US also trained and equipped Kurdish fighters, who played a key role in the fight against ISIS.

The US military also provided logistical and intelligence support to Syrian rebel groups. This included providing communications equipment, ammunition, and medical supplies, as well as intelligence on the movement of enemy forces.

The US involvement was not limited to counterterrorism efforts. The US government and military also actively worked to promote democratic values and support the Syrian opposition. In 2012, the United States recognized the Syrian Opposition Coalition as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people. The US government also imposed economic sanctions on the Syrian government and individuals associated with the regime to put pressure on the Assad government to negotiate a political solution to the conflict.

The US military presence in Syria continued after the defeat of ISIS in 2019. The US maintained a small force of around 900 soldiers in the country, mostly focused on counterterrorism operations and advising local forces. In 2020, the US President at the time, Donald Trump, announced that he would withdraw all US forces from Syria, but the decision was later reversed, and some US forces remain in the country to this day.

The US involvement in the Syrian Revolution has been controversial. Critics have argued that the US government, and particularly the Obama administration, did not do enough to support the Syrian opposition and bring an end to the conflict. Some have also criticized the US for its role in the destabilization of the region, arguing that US intervention contributed to the rise of extremist groups such as ISIS. Others have argued that the US should have focused more on diplomacy and political solutions rather than military intervention.

US military intervention in the Syrian Revolution had significant effects on US foreign policy in the Middle East and around the globe.

Firstly, the intervention highlighted a shift towards counterterrorism as a key focus of US foreign policy. Following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 (9/11), US foreign policy had gradually moved towards a focus on counterterrorism. The Syrian intervention continued this trend, with the US government and military prioritizing the fight against ISIS as one of its primary objectives. This focus on counterterrorism also led to the increasing use of drone strikes, special forces, and other covert actions in US military operations.

Secondly, the intervention raised questions about US policy in cases of regime change. The US government's initial support for the Syrian opposition indicated a stance in favor of regime change. However, the intervention's outcome ultimately was to maintain a status quo between the regime and the opposition forces, without any clear path towards resolution. The lack of a coherent strategy for post-conflict reconstruction in Syria highlighted concerns over the effectiveness of US policies focusing on regime change.

Thirdly, the US military involvement in Syria increased tensions with other global and regional powers. The intervention was complicated by the involvement of Russia, which supported the government of President Bashar al-Assad. It also raised concerns among Iran, another key regional power in the Middle East, as the US implicitly supported the Syrian Rebels who were backed by Iran's regional rivals, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. This complicated wider US foreign policy goals in the region, including the Obama administration's attempts to negotiate a nuclear deal with Iran while supporting Shiite forces in Iraq fighting ISIS.

In summary, the United States military intervention in the Syrian Revolution highlighted the country's emphasis on counterterrorism, brought to the forefront concerns about the regime change, and significantly affected US relations with various regional and global powers.

4. United States's economic involvement in Syria

The United States' economic involvement in the Syrian Revolution has primarily centered around imposing economic sanctions on the Syrian government and individuals associated with it. These sanctions aimed to pressure the Syrian government to end the conflict and negotiate a political solution.

The first wave of US sanctions on Syria were imposed in 2004 under the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act, which targeted Syria for supporting terrorism, occupying Lebanon, and pursuing weapons of mass destruction. These early sanctions were relatively limited in scope and had minimal impact on the Syrian economy.

However, the US tightened sanctions in response to the Syrian government's actions during the Syrian Revolution. In 2011, the US government-imposed sanctions on Syrian officials, including President Bashar al-Assad, and entities involved in human rights abuses or supporting the government's crackdown on protesters. The US also sanctioned entities that were involved in Syria's oil and gas industry, which was a vital source of revenue for the Syrian government.

Over time, the US expanded its sanctions to target other sectors of the Syrian economy, including the banking and finance, energy, and telecommunications industries. The sanctions also targeted individuals and companies that were providing financial and material support to the Syrian government.

The economic impact of US sanctions on Syria has been significant. The country's economy has suffered from rising inflation, falling living standards, and increasing poverty. Many Syrian businesses and citizens have been cut off from the international financial system, making it difficult for them to trade with the rest of the world. The Syrian government has also faced difficulties securing international loans and foreign investment.

The US economic involvement in the Syrian Revolution has had broader implications for US foreign policy as well. The emphasis on sanctions as a tool for pressuring foreign governments has raised questions about the effectiveness of US sanctions policy and its impact on civilian populations. Additionally, the US sanctions on Syria may have indirectly benefited countries like Russia and Iran, which have been critical economic and military supporters of the Syrian government.

US economic involvement in the Syrian Revolution has had significant effects on US foreign policy in the Middle East and beyond.

Firstly, the use of economic sanctions as a tool for achieving foreign policy objectives established a precedent for the US. The expanded use of sanctions in the years following the Syrian Revolution indicated that the US government increasingly saw economic pressure as an effective means of achieving objectives in foreign affairs. This trend would continue in subsequent years, with the US government using economic sanctions against a variety of countries such as Iran, Venezuela, and North Korea.

Secondly, the use of economic sanctions in Syria highlighted questions about the impact of sanctions on local populations. As the sanctions were increasingly applied on a broad scale to the Syrian economy, humanitarian organizations raised concerns about the impact of sanctions on the Syrian civilian population. It also highlighted concerns about the use of sanctions as a tool of economic warfare and their effectiveness in achieving foreign policy objectives.

Thirdly, the economic sanctions imposed on Syria led to deeper entrenchment of other international actors in the conflict, particularly Russia and Iran, countries which have opposed Western sanctions regimes. These countries have used the levying of Western sanctions as justification for strengthening their strategic relationships with countries like Syria. The close political and economic relationships between these countries have complicated broader US foreign policy goals in the region.

In summary, the United States' economic involvement in the Syrian Revolution through the imposition of economic sanctions has established a model for the use of economic pressure in foreign policy decision-making. However, it has also raised concerns about the broader effectiveness of sanctions and their impact on civilian populations, and it has had broader implications for US relations with key actors in the Middle East such as Russia and Iran. The United States' economic involvement in the Syrian Revolution has centered around imposing economic sanctions on the Syrian government and associated individuals and entities. These sanctions aimed to pressure the government to end the conflict and negotiate a political solution. The sanctions have had a significant economic impact on Syria, but their broader effectiveness and impact on US foreign policy have been subject to debate.

5. Impact against other post-September conflicts

The impact of the Syrian Revolution and the subsequent civil war is significant when compared to other post-9/11 conflicts in terms of casualties, displacement, and regional stability.

In terms of casualties, the Syrian Revolution has been one of the deadliest conflicts of the post-9/11 era. While exact figures are hard to come by, estimates range from around 400,000 to over 500,000 people killed since fighting began in 2011. This death toll far surpasses that of other post-9/11 conflicts such as the Iraq War, which resulted in an estimated 186,000 to 200,000 deaths.

Displacement of Syrians has also been significant in comparison to other post-9/11 conflicts. According to the United Nations, more than 6.1 million Syrians are internally displaced and over 5.5 million have fled the country as refugees. This mass displacement has put a significant burden on neighboring countries, particularly Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey, which have endured most of the refugee crisis. The displacement figures for the Syrian Revolution far exceed those of other post-9/11 conflicts, such as the Iraq War, which resulted in roughly 2 million internally displaced persons and 2.5 million refugees.

The impact of the Syrian Revolution on regional stability has also been significant. The conflict has exacerbated existing sectarian tensions in the region, with the Sunni-Shiite divide playing a significant role in the conflict. It has also contributed to the rise of extremist groups such as ISIS, which took advantage of the chaos to seize territory in Syria and Iraq. While ISIS has largely been defeated, the conflict and its consequences have also fueled the rise of other extremist groups in the region.

In comparison to other conflicts, the consequences of the Syrian Revolution have also had a significant impact on the global stage. The intervention of Russia to support the Syrian government, along with Iran's significant military and strategic support for Syria, has highlighted the importance of Syria as a strategic ally for these countries. It has also contributed to an increase in tensions between these countries and the United States.

The Syrian Revolution and its aftermath had a significant impact on US foreign policy in the Middle East and beyond.

Firstly, the Syrian Revolution highlighted the limitations of US policy focused on regime change and its potential consequences. The US government's support for the Syrian

opposition and advocacy of democracy in Syria collided with rising extremist groups and the humanitarian catastrophe caused by prolonged fighting. This complex situation highlighted to US policymakers that supporting regime change could lead to unpredictable and unintended outcomes, increasing the debate around the US's interventionist foreign policy.

Secondly, the Syrian Revolution contributed to the rise of ISIS, which presented a new and prominent threat to global security. The US military intervention in Syria was primarily focused on counterterrorism and fighting ISIS, which had taken control of significant portions of the country. ISIS's rise in Syria and the subsequent coalition to combat it raised questions as to the US' effectiveness in dealing with the terrorist group. Moreover, the threat of ISIS also called into question broader US policy in the region, including US support for autocratic governments in the Middle East.

Thirdly, the Syrian Revolution significantly affected US relations with Russia and Iran. Russia's intervention in support of President Bashar al-Assad highlighted the growing strategic importance of Syria for Russia and its commitment to protecting its interests in the region. Moreover, Russia's intervention raised concerns about the potential for direct military conflict between Russia and the United States. Iran's significant support for the Syrian government also raised alarms for US policymakers, as it highlighted Iran's regional ambitions and its role in fueling sectarian tension in the Middle East.

In summary, the Syrian Revolution has been significantly more deadly and has had a greater impact on regional stability and global affairs than other post-9/11 conflicts such as the Iraq War. The mass displacement of Syrians and the rise of extremist groups have also had a significant humanitarian impact. The intervention of Russia and Iran in support of the Syrian government has also contributed to heightened tensions in the region and globally.

6. Conclusion

The Syrian revolution has had a profound impact on US foreign policy, shaping the Obama and Trump administrations' responses to the conflict and altering US relations with key regional actors. While the Obama administration's policy was marked by hesitation and limited engagement, the Trump administration's policy was characterized by assertiveness and confrontation. However, the conflict in Syria remains unresolved, and the United States faces ongoing challenges in the region, including balancing its relationships with Saudi Arabia and Iran and preventing the resurgence of ISIS.

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