

The Determinants of US Foreign Policy in Syrian Civil War

Asad Ullah¹

Abstract

The unrivaled power which once the United States wielded is in decline globally. And this decline of power has been more visible in the Syrian civil war which started in early 2011 and where the US allied with opposition forces who wanted to overthrow the ruling Assad regime. The disarray in US response towards Syrian civil war has been visible since day one. The inability of US to devise coherent strategy to help the opposition forces to topple the Assad regime has been debated hotly by scholars and informed observers of Middle Eastern politics. In this article, the author will argue that three factors domestic, regional and international have determined the US response to Syrian crisis and constrained its ability to shape the outcome of the crisis.

Key Words: Civil war, Totalitarian regime, Realism, Great power politics, Military intervention, Mass protest, Armed opposition, Non-State actors

1: Introduction

The history of bi-lateral relationship between United States of America and Syrian Arab Republic has been complex, tense and hostile throughout its history. This relationship has been characterized by the domestic politics of both countries and the strategic, political and social upheavals of Middle East. Bi-lateral relations further plummeted when US announced plans to attack Iraq and topple Saddam on the pretext that it was harboring terrorism and was secretly involved in developing weapons of mass destruction. Syria opposed the invasion of Iraq and this opposition resulted in deteriorating relations between the two countries. The stern opposition of Syrian government of US invasion of Iraq, which it calls an outrageous unilateral act against the norms of international law and violation of sovereignty of an independent state, has met with strong US opposition. When news surfaced on the media that Syrian government has provided Iraqi army with weapons and offered senior Iraqi officials safe havens, the US Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld warned Syria and vowed to make it accountable for "shipping sophisticated military equipment including night-vision goggles to the Iraqi military and called the shipment hostile acts" (Brinkley, 2003).

¹ M.Phil Scholar Area Study Center, University of Balochistan, Quetta

The opposition of Syria to US invasion and occupation of Iraq did not go well for US. It tried to punish Syria for defying US efforts in the region by involving in covert actions to sabotage US plans in the region. During this tense atmosphere of hostile bi-lateral relations, the US congress resurfaced its Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act (SALSRA) which called upon Syria “to halt support for terrorism, end its occupation of Lebanon, stop its development of weapons of mass destruction and hold Syria accountable for its role in the Middle East” (Schenker, 2006). Things spiraled out of control in dramatic turns of events when former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri was assassinated in massive bombing in February 14, 2005 in Beirut. This high-profile assassination set in motion paramount strategic and political changes in motion in the region and beyond. It provided the opportunity for Lebanese to call for an end of Syrian army presence. The subsequent media campaign unmasked the Syrian state sponsored terrorist activities in the region. The UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1559 in September 2004 which “called on remaining foreign forces to withdraw from Lebanon, insisted on the disbanding of Lebanese militias and declared support for a free and fair presidential election” (Council & Assembly, 2005).

2: An overview of the existing literature:

From the start of the mass uprising in Syria in early 2011, the objectives, strategies and outcomes of the United States foreign policy towards the Syrian crisis has been debated fiercely by US foreign policy experts, political pundits and concerned journalists. Arab Spring took US policy makers by surprise but the initial response of US towards the popular mass protests in Syria stated that “it wants to force Assad from power and to check the rise of the extremists in the opposition” (Tabler, 2013) and demanded from “President Assad to step down from power to honor the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people for democratic change” (Jafarova, 2014). The rationale behind the US demand from president to step down from power was to make sure “regional stability, avoiding havens for terrorists, preventing weapons of mass destruction, supporting Israeli security, encouraging economic growth and promoting democratization” (Sorenson, 2013). To check the rise of regional hegemon and limit the foreign influence has been another major factor where the US has tried “preventing the rise of regional hegemon, nuclear proliferation, significant terrorist attack on the homeland as well as ensuring access to oil and the security of regional allies” (Krause, 2012). But for some scholars the major defining determinants of US policy in Syrian civil war have been “reevaluating the US position on Assad, navigating the Kurdish-Turkish conflict and understanding and

addressing the influence of Iran and Russia” (Barron, 2018) and “to support the Syrian opposition enabling them to overthrow the Syrian regime, seeking to achieve in Syria to prevent the arrival of weapons to Hezbollah and Hamas, to overthrow Russia’s allies in the Middle East including the Syrian regime and to achieve through its attitude on the Syrian crisis is related to the issue of energy struggle especially for natural gas” (Yurtsever, 2018).

In this article, the author will be focused mainly on the three major determinants or sources of the US conduct in Syrian civil war and they include domestic, regional and international factors which influenced the US policy options.

3: The domestic sources

The first factor which determined the United States policy response to Syrian civil war was the domestic political setup of the country. Since the attacks of September 11, 2001 on World Trade Center in New York and Pentagon in Washington DC, US public opinion was motivated by the fact on how to punish those who had carried such heinous acts and the preparation of response plan by policy makers to respect those expectations. Those who carried out those attacks were dubbed as terrorists and a counter-terrorism plan was put into action under which US attacked Afghanistan where it toppled the Taliban regime who had provided sanctuaries to Al-Qaeda operatives and its leaders. The US officially stated that the purpose of its attack on Afghanistan was to remove Taliban from power and to make the country safe for democracy. Its nation-building and democracy exporting project did not stop there and in 2003 ‘despite the huge opposition of international community’ US attacked Iraq and toppled the Saddam regime on false intelligence reports that it was building weapons of mass destruction and harboring terrorism. The US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq cost hugely in terms of treasure and lives which in turn compelled the US public opinion and policy makers to improvise its strategy and devise new plans to tackle the issue of terrorism worldwide. As the wars prolonged both in Afghanistan and Iraq, US public opinion turned against the war and opposed to be involved in any foreign adventure and “the response of the Obama administration to the various manifestations of the Arab Spring reflected a long-standing tension in American foreign policy between hard strategic interests and values such as human rights and support for democracy” (Gerges, 2013).

The militaristic policies of Bush administration were responsible for the huge increase in national debt. The belief that US possesses military might beyond the challenge of any possible adversary resulted in policy hubris

where the use of military and hard power rather than other means became the primary tool of US foreign policy. The Bush administration initially understated the actual cost of long war and kept it secret from the common public to avoid their outrage but “the ‘cost of war’ study group reported in June 2011 that the total cost of war on terrorism was around US \$5 trillion a claim that sharply contradicted the Pentagon’s position that the actual cost was limited to \$1 trillion” (Thompson, 2011).

By the time president Obama came to office as the US president in 2008, many radical and transformative changes had already occurred on the domestic as well as global arena. Barack Obama did not share the view of the US as the super power of the world and its role as the sheriff to maintain global peace and security. President Obama opted for multi-lateral diplomacy on issues of global peace and security and tried to engage other countries through forums like UN. The clear shift in Obama’s foreign policy approach was its emphasis on diplomacy and multi-literalism rather than the use of brute force to achieve the critical US national interests worldwide and “Obama’s policies appeared to stand for a robust American leadership role in the world but preferred not to alienate friends and allies” (Lindsay, 2014). The use of smart power where the combination of soft tools like diplomacy, economy activities, cultural exchanges along with hard tools like the use of military power and sanctions would be used in combination to achieve the US national interests. President Barack Obama hired new team of officials and persons who shared his world view. The likes of Robert Gates, Hillary Clinton, Samantha Power and others who believed on the critical role of international organizations and multilateral diplomacy to overcome the critical issues the world is facing. This approach of president Obama paid well as the faith of international community restored to some extent on the ability of US to take the concerns of other concerned into account and avoid the belligerent conduct and unilateralism. Although for president Obama, the presidency did not prove to be the bed of roses and instead had to face many obstacles like defiant Iran and North Korea over their alleged nuclear programs, two prolonged wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, global recession, troubled and weak domestic economy, the rise of other countries in terms of military and economic spheres like BRICS and most importantly the stalled Palestinian-Israeli peace negotiations in the Middle East. But nonetheless, president Obama used and utilized “regional and international forums to spell out his foreign policy approach and promote the strategy to paint America’s positive image and status worldwide. He adeptly addressed Muslims to make to launch a new beginning with them, called upon people around the world to be partners in peace and prosperity” (Pew, 2009).

The events of Arab Spring took the president Obama administration by surprise. The Obama's policy to not get involved in any new military adventurism in the Middle East after the debacle of Iraq led the administration to tough spot and tested the ability of the Obama approach of leading from behind. According to this policy, the US will not decide and force people of any country to have any specific government and will not impose any kind of regime over others until people demand for it by themselves. But when people took to the streets and demanded for political freedom and social justice and caused the fall of regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, Obama called on the ruling regimes of the region to respect the wish and legitimate demands of the people. When the popular waves of mass protests and popular dissents reached Syria, things turned ugly and the demand of the people of regime change met with brute force and more oppression. Realizing the limit of peaceful protest and mass demonstrations, people of Syria took the arms and started armed resistance against the ruling regime of president Bashar Al-Assad. Soon the whole country was engulfed in civil war which pitted the majority Sunni population of the country and against the minority Shiite ruling regime. This exacerbated the rivalries of regional countries which saw the civil war as an opportunity to subvert its rivals by supporting either the opposition or the government with arms, logistics, training camps and financial assistance. President Obama initially called the Assad regime to respect the will of the masses and step aside so that new political order could be established in the country. Aside from criticizing the killings of the protesters and detention of the dissidents in Syria, president Obama called the use of chemical and biological weapons as the red line which if crossed would meet with direct US response. But as the civil war prolonged and more countries got involved in the conflict, the atrocities against the masses increased from both sides and the red line was crossed as the alleged use of chemical weapons against the masses was reported. President Obama along with its regional and international allies did not provide critical support for the opposition forces in battlefield. They were of the view that any support to the opposition forces would end up in the hands of ISIS, Al-Nusra Front and Al-Qaeda. The election campaign promise of Obama of not to commit US forces in any future conflict in Middle East and its inability to hold president Assad responsible for its alleged use of chemical weapons against the common people contributed to the bewilderment of US objectives and policy in Syrian civil war and the strategy of 'leading from behind' did not work in Syria "where government troops and the opposition rebel fighters are committing violent crimes against humanity. Syria's great power backers, Russia and China, defeated two Security Council resolutions to initiate actions against the Assad

government which also enjoys ironclad support from its regional partners Iran and the Lebanon based group Hezbollah” (Report, 2014).

4: The regional sources

The second important factor in determining the US behavior and decision-making process towards Syrian civil war has been the regional geo-political scenario specially since the invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq in 2003 by the US. On the eve of Arab Spring, Middle East was going through profound and mega social, political, economic and cultural changes. The perceived role of US as the sole hegemon was eroding and its dominance of the regional affairs since the end of the Cold War was coming to an end. Major factors like the US invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, the decreased importance of Middle Eastern oil for US economy, the financial crisis of 2008 and the election of Barak Obama as the US president in 2008 who criticized the military adventurism of his predecessors prompted the reluctant behavior of decision makers in Washington to commit for any long-term policy in the Middle East. Much has changed for US foreign policy in general and its focus on its hegemonic role in particular since the financial crisis of 2008 as “the Great Recession has had a two-fold impact. First, it highlighted the shift of global wealth and power from West to East a trend illustrated by China’s breathtaking rapid rise to great power status. Second, it has raised doubts about the robustness of US primacy’s economic and financial underpinnings” (Layne, 2012).

The US invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003 has changed much of the old political landscape of the Middle East where Arab Nationalism was one of the most dominant forces. But most of the observers of the region are of the view that today’s Middle East is much more different and complex as of that pre-2003 period or before the US invasion and occupation of Iraq. Even though there is fierce debate about the nature of the regional change but most of the scholars are of the view that the transformative changes have occurred on two fundamental level which bear far-reaching consequences for the US policy makers in the region and that transformative change have occurred many fronts.

First, their point of departure is a distinction between an old and a new Middle East in which the latter is characterized distinctively new regional dynamics qualitatively different from earlier days. This is reflected in the absence of one of the most prominent themes in twentieth century discussion about Middle East politics: the impact of Arab nationalism on regional politics. This issue is presented as a thing of the

past or simply ignored. Instead regional politics in the New Middle East is assumed to be driven either by normal Westphalian *raison d'état* logic or by the new region-specific dynamics reflecting cleavages within Islam or between so-called moderates and radicals. Thus, a second striking consistency in the overall debate is a consensus on how Arab politics has ceased to be distinctly Arab. Even the very existence of an Arab World has been put into question by observers writing it off as nothing but a mirage in the Middle Eastern desert" (ZISSER, 2006).

The perceptions of masses and ruling friendly regimes of US as the sole hegemon and reliable partner in the region and on the international stage faced major challenges and doubts. The invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003 and the toppling of Saddam regime by the US proved to be the turning point and the initial start of trust deficit between the US and its historical allies in the region. The election of Obama as the US president in 2008 proved to be the last straw on the camel's back. During his election campaign Obama criticized the policies of his predecessors and vowed to change them if elected as the next president. Once in office, president Obama started to materialize on his election campaign by changing the structure of overall US foreign policy and objectives in the region of Middle East. Among his many radical changes in the overall US policy for the region, he started to negotiate with Iran over its nuclear issue along with the concert and consent of permanent members of UN Security Council and Germany. This approach to normalize relations with Iran by seeking an agreement over its nuclear program alarmed the regional rivals of Iran and "the 2015 announcement of a major deal between Iran and six world powers including US was but the latest in a list of major jolts to the Middle East regional system. In the last several years alone, the region has been rocked by the pro-democracy uprisings of the Arab Spring, followed by the dark turn toward civil wars, insurgencies and increased terrorism in Syria, Libya and Yemen" (Ryan, 2018).

5: The international sources

The third most important and crucial factor in determining the US behavior and policy towards Syrian civil war has been the transformative changes global politics. The superpower role which the US assumed after the disintegration of USSR in early 1990's and its triumph over the its rival Communism was not supposed to last for good. An international system comprised of one super power, no other significant major power and many

minor powers would have to come to an end as the logic of international realm which is constant struggle for power and supremacy over each other had to have its own consequences. Contemporary international system is a strange hybrid of “uni-multipolar system with one superpower and several major powers. The settlement of key international issues requires action by the single superpower but always with some combination of other major states and the single superpower can, however, veto action on key issues by combinations of other states” (Huntington, 1999).

The primacy of US on international affairs was made possible due to factors like the size of its defense budget which is more than the next 20 spender countries combined, its nuclear superiority, its modern and lethal air force, its blue-water navy, the sophistication of its army and arms in terms of both quality and quantity, its ability to project its power around the world and last but not the least being the biggest economy of the world. But all those positive and promising factors and indicators did not hide the fact that the US power is in decline in the region of Middle East where two costly and prolonged wars in Afghanistan from 2001 and in Iraq from 2003 have strained the financial and political resources of the country. By overlooking the hegemonic role of the US in the region and the financial burden which it carries has compelled the US to improvise its policy of nation-building as Senator Joe Manchin III said that “we can no longer in good conscience cut services and programs at home, raise taxes or lift the debt ceiling in order to fund nation-building in Afghanistan. The question the president faces we all face is quite simple: Will we choose to rebuild America or Afghanistan? In light of our nation’s fiscal peril, we cannot do both” (Cooper, 2011).

The post-Cold War order led by US first had its full exhibition in the region of Middle East where an international coalition of countries led by US expelled Saddam from Kuwait in 1991. All major countries including Russia, China and European Union supported US efforts in liberating Kuwait from Iraqi occupation and restoring order in the region. The region of Middle East was important for US policy makers due to its strategic location, natural resources and strategic waterways. But it was the region of Middle East and going to war with Iraq in 2003 which unraveled the US hegemonic status in the region. The unilateralism of US to invade Iraq on the pretext of having weapons of mass destruction and support for international terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda, the claims which were made on false intelligence information, dented the US image not only in the region but also it provoked its long-standing allies like European countries who strongly opposed the invasion of Iraq. The claims and hopes by senior administration members and analysts in Bush administration that the toppling of Saddam regime would prove the way for democratization of the

region and would make the region more safe but all those claims did not materialize.

The removal of regime coupled with subsequent misguided decisions by the US-led occupying authority that ran Iraq from May 2003 through June 2004 to dismantle much of the army and to ostracize many members of the ruling Baath Party fueled a civil war between the long-discriminated-against Shiite plurality and minority Sunnis who had lost their advantaged status with the fall of the Saddam Hussain regime (Haass, 2018).

The invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq by US in 2003 affirmed the fact that US has no regards for multi-lateral international bodies like UN which did not approve the US move vis-à-vis Iraq. A multi-polar world where many powerful countries would compete, coalesce and clash for the safety and security of their national interests over issues like the raging Syrian civil war was no more evident than in the United Nations Security Council where Russia ‘long-standing ally of Assad regime’ would oppose any move by US and allies to use power against the brutality of Assad regime which it waged against its own people. The common understood behavior that US can get whatever it wants to through unilateral acts and the use of international organizations like UN proved to be misleading as the concept of “unipolarity is misleading because it exaggerates the degree to which the United States is able to get the results it wants in some dimensions of world politics. American power is less effective than it might first appear” (Skidmore, 2015).

The assertive and hawkish foreign policy of president Bush did not bode well for US allies around the world. Disregard for international institutions like UN and rebuking the traditional allies on issues of mutual interests dented the image of US to huge extent around the globe. The use of force through unilateral acts like invasion and occupation of Iraq on false intelligence information in 2003, labelling countries like Iraq, Iran and North Korea as an ‘Axis of Evil’ and countries like Syria, Cuba and Libya as ‘Beyond the Axis of Evil’ by president Bush and his foreign policy advisors and based on their petty world view created strong anti-US resentments in adversaries like Russia and China and alarmed allies around the world. This bewilderment and confusion surrounding US foreign policy initiatives sparked huge anti-unilateralism debate in US and with the ascendancy of Barak Obama as US president in 2008 turned the direction of US policy and oriented it towards more multi-lateral approach where issues of common

interests would be discussed and resolved through multi-lateral institutions and forums where all concerned major players on an issue would be consulted and their views taken into account as Secretary of State pointed out in her speech to Council on Foreign Relations on September 8, 2010 that “we must also take into account those countries that are growing rapidly and already playing more influential roles in their regions and in global affairs such as China, and India, Turkey, Mexico and Brazil, Indonesia and South Africa as well as Russia as it redefines its own role in the world” (Kessler, 2010).

The use of International forums like UNSC to discredit the Assad regime and replace it with something more suitable to US interests was met with resistance from longstanding ally of Assad regime Russia and China. In the early stages of the Syrian crisis, the US and its allies tried three unsuccessful attempts in the Security Council to carveout a legally binding Chapter VII resolution on Syria. In the first drafted resolution of 4 October 2011, unspecified measures would be taken if the Assad regime failed to end the violence. On the second drafted resolution adopted on 4 February 2012 the words further measures were added if the government failed to respond to the demands of International community. The third resolution which was adopted on 19 July 2012 wide range of demands were made like accountability, the formation of transitional government and the endorsement of Geneva Communique and its implementation. Keeping these demands in view presented by US and allies “all three resolutions were vetoed by Russia and China, who have made clear throughout the whole period of the Council’s handling of the Syrian crisis that they would not allow the Libyan scenario be repeated in Syria” (Jafarova. 2014. 19).

6: Conclusion

United States of America along with its regional and global allies have emerged as the chief opponent of the ruling Assad regime in Syria from early 2011 when the waves of the Arab Spring reached the country. The initial stage of uprising against the Assad regime in Syria took the US by surprise and shocked the policy makers in Washington. President Obama along with its high officials called on president Assad to step down and make way for the fresh start of the country. When the uprising turned into an open conflict, president Obama hardened its rhetoric in response to the brutality of Assad regime. it started to supply limited logistical support to the opposition forces and subsequently called the use of chemical weapons as the red line which the regime in Damascus should avoid at all cost. But when the Assad regime allegedly used chemical weapons against the combatants and non-combatants, president Obama did not hold Assad regime accountable for

their brutality which further incentivized the ruling regime to use all power against the combatants and non-combatants alike. The coherent policy initiatives and responses by the US were further limited by the emergence of numerous non-state actors on the battlefield which blurred the line between the moderate and hardline opposition forces. The reluctance of president Obama to commit substantial direct and indirect material support limited the options of US and allies alike in the Syrian crisis. The reluctance of US to take the lead role to topple Assad regime hindered the options for allies and provided an opportunity to powers like Russia to provide full spectrum support to sustain Assad regime in Damascus.

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