

OBAMA AND SYRIAN CRISIS: STRATEGIC ABSENCE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Abstract

This study focuses on the Obama's Syrian policy. It explains the changing policy of US administration towards Syrian crisis by considering Obama's Middle East politics and Arab demonstrations. In this context, Obama's approach to Syrian crisis can be evaluated in three different terms: The first term was started with Syrian uprisings in March and lasted until August 2011. The discourse of Obama in this term was 'encouraging Assad for political reform'. The second term was started with regime change discourse in August 2011 and lasted until 2013 August. Obama's avoiding from military intervention against chemical attack by Assad regime was the basic implication of changing his policy. Emerging of ISIL was a groundwork for Obama to develop a new policy for counter strategy. All changes in Obama's policy towards Syrian crisis implies a strategic absence in his approach.

Keywords: Obama doctrine, Syrian crisis, military intervention, ISIL

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OBAMA VE SURİYE KRİZİ: STRATEJİK NOKSANLIK VE SONUÇLARI

Özet

Bu çalışma Obama'nın Suriye politikasına odaklanmaktadır. Bu bağlamda Obama'nın Ortadoğu politikası ve Arap isyanlarına karşı takındığı tutum dikkate alınarak Suriye krizinde değişen siyaseti açıklanacaktır. Politik reform çağrısı ile başlayan, rejim değişimi söylemi ile devam eden ve nihayetinde IŞİD'e karşı savaşa evrilen Suriye politikasının neden değiştiği ve bu politikanın hem Suriye krizi hem de krizin Türkiye açısından sonuçları değerlendirilecektir. Çalışma Obama'nın yapılandırılmış ve hayata geçirilmiş bir Suriye stratejisi olmadığı varsayımından hareket etmektedir. Bunun yanında Obama yönetiminin krizin evrildiği her yeni aşamada yeni bir pozisyon aldığını ve birbirleri ile tutarsız olan adımlarının kaynağının da bu yaklaşımdan kaynaklandığını iddia etmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Obama doktrini, Suriye krizi, askeri müdahale, IŞİD.

أوباما والأزمة السورية: نتائج انعدام الرؤية الاستراتيجية المختصر

إن هذا العمل يركز على سياسة الرئيس الأمريكي أوباما في سورية. يتم في هذا السياق توضيح سياسة أوباما في الأزمة السورية عبر التركيز على سياسته في الشرق الأوسط وموقفه من التمرد العربي. سيتم تقييم تبدل السياسة التي بدأت بالمناداة بالإصلاح السياسي ومن ثم تغيير النظام وتحولت في الآخر إلى مقاومة تنظيم داعش في سوريا، وتقييم نتائج هذه السياسة من ناحية الأزمة السورية ومن ناحية التأثير على تركيا. العمل ينطلق من مبدأ أنه لا توجد استراتيجية مبنية ومطبقة لأوباما حول سوريا. وإلى جانب ذلك يتم اعتبار أن إدارة الرئيس أوباما تتغير وفقاً للتحويلات التي تطرأ على الأزمة السورية وأنه يتم اتخاذ موقف جديد في كل مرحلة، وأن مصدر هذه الخطوات الغير متناسقة إنما هي هذه السياسة المتبعة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: عقيدة أوباما، الأزمة السورية، التدخل العسكري، داعش

Introduction

The policies applied by the U.S. not only made it one of the main actors in the Syrian crisis, but also opened a pathway for unintended consequences to occur. It is difficult to argue that Obama implemented a strategy that had clear aims, instruments, and a clear method after the uprisings in Syria. It can be observed that although Obama depicted his aims in discourse, rather than implement these, he took position according to the flow of events. Due to the fact that the Assad regime had been problematized by the U.S. administrations throughout the Cold War, 1990s and 2000s, it would have been expected for them to pursue a regime change in Syria. However, although Obama used discourse along these lines after the uprisings began, rather than applying a strategy in this regard, he changed his position according to the Syrian regime on many occasions.

Just because the U.S. has been influential throughout the crisis, this does not mean that it has a consistent Syria policy that it acts within. Strategy is defined as having a concrete objective within political objectives,¹ and the use of instruments in certain ways in order to reach these objectives.² In this sense, it can be stated that, during the first two terms, U.S. policy had two important dilemmas on a strategic level. The first dilemma is the fact that although an objective was depicted on a discourse level, it was never applied in practice. In other words, the desultoriness between discourse and practice. When Obama gave Assad the chance for change and reform, he also stated that Assad would have to step aside. However, the Obama administration never acted, even after the regime intervened in the peaceful protests. A similar situation occurred when Assad passed the "red line" when he used chemical weapons. Meanwhile, the second dilemma was the fact that the Obama administration did not act within the framework of strategic integrity (with clear aims, instruments, and methods). It is possible to state that these two dilemmas were overcome by the Obama administration in their fight against ISIL.

This article is divided into three sections. The first section provides a short summary of how Obama tried to change the Middle East he inherited from the previous administration. The second section provides the reader with the different approaches to Obama's Syria policy and underlines the framework that this study is built upon. The third section assesses the Obama administration's policies in three different milestones. The National Security Strategy

¹ Colin S. Gray, *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practise*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

² Hasan Basri Yalçın, *Ulusal Güvenlik Stratejisi*, İstanbul: SETA Kitapları, 2017, p.24-25.

published during Obama's tenure will be taken as the primary source in the assessments made throughout this piece. A literature review consisting of academic literature, expert reviews, and news pieces, will also be provided.

Bush's Legacy and Obama's Middle East Policy

The U.S.' Syria policy witnessed many ups and downs for a long time. The U.S. President adopted a new 'Bush Doctrine' after the 9/11 attacks and gave the war on terror a new concept. Within this framework, after the 2003 Iraq war, Syria was listed in the "evil axis" and the issue of whether sanctions will be applied on Syria or whether it will be invaded or not raised on the agenda on the reasoning that Syria was supporting terrorism.³ During this time, the Syrian opposition wanted to transform the Assad regime's openings into a process of "democratization" and therefore used the U.S.' regional political stance as a lever. In this context, in a declaration issued in May 2003, by referring to the U.S.' and Israel's "aggressive, racist, and hostile politics," they requested reform to be made against "hostile enemy threats."⁴

After the assassination of former Lebanon Prime Minister Rafic Hariri on 14 February, 2005, the U.S. administration began applying more pressure on the Assad regime. Prior to the assassination of Hariri, on 2 September, 2004, with the lead of the U.S. and France, resolution 1559 was proposed to the United Nations Security Council, calling Syria to withdraw its soldiers from Lebanon and for the disarmament of groups in Lebanon (these statements pointed to Hezbollah). The Hariri assassination solidified the foundations on which increasing pressure would be applied to the Assad regime in the international arena. On 20 October, the UN Mehlis report that was looking into the assassination of Hariri was announced and on 31 October, UNSC resolution 1636, which foresaw sanctions on Syria, was declared.⁵ The Bush regime also withdrew their Ambassador from Damascus⁶ and relations were reduced to charge d'affaires. With the increasing pressure by the U.S., Syria withdrew its military from Lebanon and this was expected to calm bilateral relations. However, the Bush regime did not send back its Ambassador.

³ Tom Regan, "Is U.S. Planning an Iraq-style 'Regime Change' in Syria?", *Christian Science Monitor*, 9 November 2005.

⁴ Carsten Wieland, *Syria: Ballots or Bullets? Democracy, Islamism, and Secularism in the Levant*, (Seattle: Cune Press, 2006).

⁵ Ellen Lust-Okar, "Reform in Syria: Steering Between the Chinese Model and Regime Change", Marina Ottaway, Julia Choucair-Vizoso, *Beyond the Facade: Political Reform in the Arab World*, Washington, Carnegie Endowment, 2008, p.75.

⁶ "Syria Stops Cooperating With U.S. Forces and C.I.A.", *The New York Times*, 24 May 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/24/politics/syria-stops-cooperating-with-us-forces-and-cia.html>

After Obama got elected, he tried to differ his approach to the Middle East from that of the Bush administration. In comparison to the “preventative action” discourse and policies applied by Bush, Obama preferred a more soft rhetoric, less costly, and a more multilateral approach in his fight against terrorism. There are two clear examples of this. When Obama visited Cairo University in order to clear the image the U.S. had in the region after the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, he called for a “new beginning” with the Islamic world.⁷ In regards to Iran, which was a country that the Bush administration had targeted, Obama sent messages to Iran, stating “If it opens the fist it’s clenched, it’ll find our reaching arm.”⁸ Obama employed a similar approach against Syria and in February 2010, he appointed a new ambassador to Syria.⁹

The performance Obama displayed during his first term received positive reactions from the Middle East and the greater Muslim world. However, the stance he took after the beginning of the Arab Spring in 2011 and the increasing complexity in the region brought many debates in both academia and politics. On the one hand, Obama’s rhetoric opening the pathway for change, and on the other, his changing policies in front of oppressive regimes, just like in the case of Syria, became the main focal point of these debates. This is because Obama wanted to reach his own aims by pursuing a multilateral stance without undertaking the costs.

In order to merge these factors, a form of eclecticism was required in both theory and practice. The question of whether or not Obama had a doctrine or grand strategy due to this eclectic strategy preference was intensively discussed. Many international relations theorists and analysts¹⁰ claim that Obama did not have a consistent grand strategy and that he pulled many factors of foreign policy to the center and designed policies accordingly. Gerges described this situation as “a doctrine without a doctrine”¹¹ and Murray defined

⁷ “Obamanın Kahire konuşması”, BBC Turkish, 5 June 2009, http://www.bbc.co.uk/turkish/news/story/2009/06/090604_obama_speech.shtml

⁸ Yahya Bostan, “İran seçimleri Obama’nın hesaplarını bozdu”, *Anlayış*, July 2009, No 74.

⁹ Ewen MacAskill, “US appoints first ambassador to Damascus since 2005”, *The Guardian*, 17 February 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/feb/17/us-ambassador-syria-robert-ford>

¹⁰ Some names that share this perspective; John J. Mearsheimer, “Imperial by Design,” *The National Interest* 111, January-February 2011 pp. 16-34, <https://nationalinterest.org/article/imperial-by-design-4576> ; Fareed Zakaria, “Wanted: A New Grand Strategy,” *Newsweek*, 8 December 2008, <https://www.newsweek.com/fareed-zakaria-wanted-new-global-strategy-85311> Niall Ferguson, “Obama’s Egypt and Foreign-Policy Failures”, *Newsweek*, 14 February 2011 <https://www.newsweek.com/obamas-egypt-and-foreign-policy-failures-68731>;

¹¹ Fawaz Gerges, “The Obama approach to the Middle East: the end of America’s moment? ”, *International Affairs*, 89: 2 (2013) 299–323, p.301.

the situation as “Obamaism.”¹² These new definitions were used to explain Obama’s eclectic strategy.

However, it is possible to find the roots of Obama’s foreign policy preferences in the basic approaches used to explain U.S. foreign policy. In this context, the approaches that appear at the forefront are isolationism, interventionism, liberal institutionalism, and selective engagement.¹³ Either take into account a U.S. president’s foreign policy or security doctrine or his discourse on trying to explain specific actions, the President will always make use of one of these doctrines and surround explanations around them. In this sense, Obama’s strategy made use of one of the most important factors of “isolationism,” which is cost-free growth by bringing together liberal powers. In other words, Obama devised a rather concrete and pragmatic strategy by borrowing a target from one tradition and the method from another.¹⁴

Obama’s eclectic approach reflected on the politics of the Middle East and after the Arab uprisings, changes occurred in his strategy according to its limitations. Some researchers argue that the reason why Obama could not act strategically in the Middle East is because he was not ready for the uprisings that broke out in the region. However, it is said that in 2010, the Obama administration had prepared a report that listed the possible consequences that discontent in the Middle East could lead to.¹⁵ More, it is known that in his second term, Bush supported the demands of democratization in the Middle East. In other words, the increasing uprisings of civil society against authoritarian regimes was a consequence of U.S. policies.

¹² Donette Murray, “Military action but not as we know it: Libya, Syria and the making of an Obama Doctrine”, *Contemporary Politics*, 19:2, 146-166, p. 150.

¹³ For a brief summary on these concepts within U.S. Grand Strategy, Barry R. Posen ve Andrew L. Ross. “Competing Visions for US Grand Strategy,” *International Security*, 21, no. 3 (Winter 1996/1997): 5-53. Çağatay Özdemir, *Amerikan Grand Stratejisi: Obama’nın Ortadoğu Mirası*, (SETA Kitapları, İstanbul, 2018), 24-38.

¹⁴ Hasan B. Yalçın, “Obama Stratejisi Ve Ortadoğu”, *Akademik ORTA DOĞU*, Volume 9, No 2, 2015, 55-74.

¹⁵ Mark Landler, “Secret Report Ordered by Obama Identified Potential Uprisings”, *The New York Times*, 11 Şubat 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/17/world/middleeast/17diplomacy.html>

Obama and the Syria Crisis: Three Periods, Three Discourses

After the crisis in Syria erupted, during the last 6 years of the Obama administration, various discourses were used and it was an accepted fact that the administration's policies had changed on many occasions. The changes in discourse and policy implementation had become an observable phenomenon. In this sense, it is possible to assess Obama's Syria policy in three periods. The first period accounts to the beginning of the uprisings and the reform and change calls made to the Assad regime between April 2011 and August 2011. This four month period came to end with the Assad regime's use of weapons against protestors. The second period begins in August 2011 and ends in August 2013 when the Assad regime used chemical weapons. In August 2011, although Obama had stated that it was time for Assad to leave, he did not take any concrete steps in this regard. More, although the U.S. President described the use of chemical weapons as the "red line," he did not opt in for any military action. The third period begins with the emergence of ISIL in 2014. In this period, Obama constructed a strategy built on fight against terrorism. It is possible to state that in comparison to previous periods, there was at least some consistency in discourse and policies in this period.

Call for Reform

With the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, which called for regime change, the Obama administration pursued an attitude that supported this request and therefore opened the pathway for change. With the UNSC resolution 1973 on 17 March, 2011, which announced Libya's airspace as a prohibited zone, many thought that the U.S. could apply a similar scenario in regards to the Syria crisis. However, Obama used a more cautious discourse for the Syrian crisis. It is possible to distinguish this from a call for reform rather than direct regime change: Once the uprisings began on 15 March, 2011, in Daraa, the Obama administration stated that a regime change in Syria was inevitable. In a speech he made on 19 May, Obama made his stance clear as he stated, "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."¹⁶ As the Assad regime increased their brutality against protestors, Obama started to use more harsh discourse. In a

¹⁶ "President Obama's Middle East speech" CBSNEWS, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/president-obamas-middle-east-speech-full-text/> 19 Mayıs 2011.

speech he made in April, Obama 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.”¹⁷ However, the Assad regime ignored these remarks and started to use more violence. During the armed intervention in the protests of 22 April, at least 70 people died, and this event was described as the “most bloodiest intervention.”¹⁸ Obama responded to this intervention with sanctions. Although not directed at Assad, Obama signed three Executive Orders against former Intelligence chief Ali Mamluk, Assad’s brother Mahir Assad, and Iran Revolutionary Guard Quds Forces.¹⁹

The question as to whether Obama took these actions because it wanted to increase pressure on the Assad regime to pursue reforms, or because he knew that the Syrian regime were not going to, was not very clear. This is because while on one hand the U.S. President put pressure on the regime to conduct reforms, he was also in contact with the opposition. More, the U.S. Ambassador to Syria, Robert Ford, attended the anti-government protests in Hama on 7 July.²⁰ This was an action that caught the attention of the Syrian government, and is something that can be used to describe the ambivalent approach of the U.S. administration. The fact that the administration stated its expectancy of the Syrian regime to pursue reforms on the one hand, and increased the confidence of the opposition on the other, is important in this regard. The attacks on the U.S. and French embassies²¹ that came after the named visit, led the U.S. to adopt a more concrete discourse. This change of policy was reflected in the statement by former U.S. Secretary of State, Clinton, who stated that Assad had lost his legitimacy and that he was not inevitable for the future of Syria.²² Taking this as an advantage, the opposition, which the Obama administration had increased talks with, asked for three clear requests. These were generating a new policy to ensure Assad leaves office, expanding the scope of sanctions, and for the UN Security Council to issue a

¹⁷ “Statement from the President on the Violence in Syria”, April, 8, 2011. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/04/08/statement-president-violence-syria>

¹⁸ “Syria unrest: ‘Bloodiest day’ as troops fire on rallies”, BBC, 22 April 2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-13167433>

¹⁹ “Statement by the Press Secretary on Syrian Human Rights Abuses”, 29 April 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/04/29/statement-press-secretary-syrian-human-rights-abuses>

²⁰ “Suriye ABD ve Fransa elçilerini uyardı”, BBC Turkish, 20 July 2011, https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2011/07/110720_syrianfm_usfrance.shtml?utm_source=twitterfeed&utm_medium=twitter

²¹ Nada Bakri, “Crowds in Syria Attack U.S. and French Embassies”, The New York Times, 11 July 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/12/world/middleeast/12syria.html>

²² Richard Spencer, “Syria: Bashar al-Assad not ‘indispensable’, says Hillary Clinton”, The Telegraph, 12 July 2011, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/8631445/Syria-Bashar-al-Assad-not-indispensable-says-Hillary-Clinton.html>

resolution condemning the violence.²³ Obama welcomed these requests positively and from August onwards, adopted a discourse on the foundations of toppling Assad.

“Regime Change” Discourse

The fact that the Assad regime was promising change on the one hand to save time, and increasing violence on the protestors on the other, caused Obama to revise his discourse on the Syria crisis. This new approach was based on regime change and from August onwards, Obama openly expressed this.²⁴ Obama’s “Assad should now leave” statement that he used on 18 August,²⁵ was consistent with his attitude towards the Arab uprisings. During these dates, the U.S. regime stood beside the anti-government uprisings that occurred in different countries. This attitude speeded up the process of regime change in Tunisia and Egypt. It also contributed to the expansion of the NATO operation in Libya and the toppling of Gaddafi. These developments led to the expectation that regime change was inevitable in Arab Spring countries and that a similar scenario could occur in Syria.

A Syrian opposition figure stated that on 22 August, Assad broadcasted a speech addressing the Syrian people, but that the Syrian people did not watch this and watched the opposition in Libya take over Tripoli instead.²⁶ This statement cannot be assessed independent of Obama’s comments against the Assad regime on 18 August. However, despite his concrete discourse, it was still unknown to the Syrian opposition and the international public how the U.S. President was going to push for regime change. There were two options in this regard.

The first option was a U.S.-led international military coalition against the Assad regime. However, Obama’s approach to changing the policies implemented during the Bush tenure indicated that he would stay away from an intervention approach. The fact that the U.S. decreased its military presence in Iraq in 2010 and 2011 also indicated that it would refrain from directly interfering in crisis regions. Despite all these, the discourse that the U.S. adop-

²³ Kılıç Buğra Kanat, *A Tale of Four Augusts: Obama’s Syria Policy*, İstanbul: SETA Kitapları, 2015, p.76

²⁴ Scott Wilson and “Assad must go, Obama says”, *Washington Post*, August 18, 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/assad-must-go-obama-says/2011/08/18/gIQAelheOJ_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.8dc8a057593c

²⁵ “Statement by President Obama on the Situation in Syria”, 18 August 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/08/18/statement-president-obama-situation-syria>

²⁶ Abdur Rahman al Shami, “Syrians must contemplate foreign help - if not the west’s”, *The Guardian*, 31.07.2011 (Online), <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/aug/31/bashar-assad-must-be-stopped>

ted suggested that it would play a main role and increased expectancies of intervention. It was difficult to conduct a NATO-led operation, as occurred in the case of Libya, due to objections from Russia. It was impossible to convince Russia for any intervention in Syria, whatever the reasons. Therefore, Obama could not risk confronting Russia in this sense.

The second option was to support the organization of the Syrian opposition, arm, and educate them, and to prevent the Assad regime from gaining support in the international arena. With this, the U.S. administration endeavored to increase the Syrian opposition's international legitimacy. An example of this was the Friends of Syria Group meeting that occurred in Tunisia on 24 February, 2012.²⁷ More, former Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton's attendance to the meeting that was held in Istanbul on 1 April, 2012, in which she stated that if the Assad regime does not stop its violence, it will be punished, was a clear indication of the administration's support for the opposition.²⁸ Statements made by the U.S. administration on the lines that the Assad regime was living its final days can also be interpreted as the government preparing to topple the Assad regime.²⁹ However, despite this concrete support, it is difficult to argue that the U.S. administration prepared a strategy with the opposition to topple the Syrian regime.

The Use of Chemical Weapons

In 2012, the use of chemical weapons was also added to the discourse of changing the Assad regime. Without letting go of his discourse on regime change, Obama declared the use of chemical weapons as the "red line."³⁰ While Obama's statement was inferred by some as a warning, other sources suggest that the regime had used chemical weapons on a small level in some areas.³¹ Therefore, it can be stated that Obama made this statement with information provided by intelligence agencies. Re-mentioning the use of chemical weapons, during a speech made at the end of December, Obama stated,

²⁷ "Suriye'nin dostları" Tunus'ta toplandı", CNN Türk, 24.02.2012, <https://www.cnnturk.com/2012/dunya/02/24/suriyenin.dostlari.tunusta.toplandi/650540.0/index.html>

²⁸ "Suriye'nin Dostları" İstanbul'da toplandı", Dünya, 01.01.2012, <https://www.dunya.com/dunya/quot Suriye 039 nin dostlariquot istanbul 039 da toplandi haberi 169851>

²⁹ Joshua Landis, "The Syrian Uprising of 2011: Why the Asad Regime is Likely To Survive to 2013", Middle East Policy Council, Spring 2012, Volume XIX, Number 1, s.73. pp. 72-77.

³⁰ James Ball, "Obama issues Syria a 'red line' warning on chemical weapons", The Washington Post, 22 August 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-issues-syria-red-line-warning-on-chemical-weapons/2012/08/20/ba5d26ec-eaf7-11e1-b811-09036bcb182b_story.html?utm_term=.56455a8f4d63

³¹ "Timeline of Syrian Chemical Weapons Activity", <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Timeline-of-Syrian-Chemical-Weapons-Activity>,

"We will continue to support the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people – engaging with the opposition, providing them with the humanitarian aid, and working for a transition to a Syria that's free of the Assad regime."³² Obama's use of ambiguous expressions and rhetoric without having a proper plan also re-emerged as a debate. Although the debate on whether the Syrian opposition should be armed began in February 2013, this was associated with the increasing power of Al Qaeda in Syria. Regardless, Obama rejected the implementation of this plan.³³

The Assad regime had to use chemical weapons in order for it to become apparent that Obama was not acting within a conducted strategy, even when he was calling for reforms and regime change. The Assad regime eventually used chemicals weapons in Eastern Ghouta on 21 August, 2013.³⁴ Although the Assad regime denied accusations of using chemical weapons, the Obama administration stated that it had evidence to show that the Syrian regime were behind the attack.³⁵ Despite this, the fact that Obama stated, "Red line on Syria belongs to the whole world,"³⁶ left military intervention expectations in vain.

A report published after a UN investigation clearly stated that sarin gas had been used.³⁷ This report has been interpreted by Assad's allies and those opposing him from different perspectives. While Russia argued that the report does not blame Assad, the French and U.S. administrations blamed the Assad regime.³⁸ Despite these accusations, rather than taking action for regime change in Syria, the Obama administration conducted policy on the Syria regime getting rid of its chemical weapons. Due to the events that had occurred, it was expected for Obama to stand behind his statements and to

³² "Remarks by the President at the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Symposium", 3 December 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/12/03/remarks-president-nunn-lugar-cooperative-threat-reduction-symposium>

³³ John Swaine, "Leon Panetta supports Hillary Clinton plan to arm Syrian rebels", The Telegraph, 7 February 2013, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9856382/Leon-Panetta-supports-Hillary-Clinton-plan-to-arm-Syrian-rebels.html>

³⁴ "Suriye'de kimyasal saldırı iddiası: 1300 ölü", Hürriyet, 21 August 2013, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/suriyede-kimyasal-saldiri-iddiasi-1300-olu-24560670>

³⁵ Tucker Reals, "Syria chemical weapons attack blamed on Assad, but where's the evidence?", CBS News, 30 August 2013, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/syria-chemical-weapons-attack-blamed-on-assad-but-wheres-the-evidence/>

³⁶ Ben Wolfgang, "Obama says 'red line' on Syria belongs to the World", The Washington Times, 4 September 2013, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/sep/4/obama-says-red-line-on-syria-belongs-to-the-world/>

³⁷ "'Clear and convincing' evidence of chemical weapons use in Syria, UN team reports", US News, 16 September 2013, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2013/09/449052-clear-and-convincing-evidence-chemical-weapons-use-syria-un-team-reports>

³⁸ "U.N. confirms sarin used in Syria attack; U.S., UK, France blame Assad", Reuters, 16 September 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-un-idUSBRE98F0ED20130916>

pursue at least a limited military intervention in order to punish the Syrian regime.³⁹ However, Obama continued his position of avoiding intervention in the crisis with an offer that came from Russia.⁴⁰

In accordance with the agreement reached between the U.S. and Russia, the process of eliminating chemical weapons from the Syrian regime began from 14 September onwards. The parties of the agreement that became known as The Framework for Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons⁴¹ were the U.S., Russia, and Syria. The role of Russia was to ensure that the Syrian regime remained bound to the agreement. According to the plan, Syria was going to join the Chemical Weapons Convention and the chemical weapons that it had were going to be eliminated in the most efficient way. With this aim, the U.S. and Russia were going to present a proposal to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons and were going to watch its application. In addition to this, the United Nations Security Council issued decision no. 2118, in regards to the Syria regime applying the plan laid out. According to this decision, the elimination of chemical weapons was going to be completed in 2014.

In June 2014, it was reported that this plan had been implemented and that a majority of the chemical weapons had been eliminated.⁴² After this date, the debate as to whether the Syrian regime had got rid of all its chemical weapons continued for a while. Due to the fact that the decision gave reference to the seventh section of the disarmament deal, there were comments that an armed intervention could occur.⁴³ However, this scenario never came on the agenda. The U.S. administration continued to act within the agreement that it reached with Russia. This approach of the Obama administration (although it did not declare it openly) was an indication that it left out the option of a military operation against the Assad regime. More importantly, this allowed for Russia to become a more active player in the Syria crisis and increased its influence on the Assad regime.

The reason why the Obama administration opted for such an attitude was because it did not have as much influence on Syria as it did on other count-

³⁹ Douglas L. Kriner, "Obama's Authorization Paradox: Syria and Congress's Continued Relevance in Military Affairs", *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 2014, 44, no. 2 (June), 309-327, p.310.

⁴⁰ Don Roberst, Julian Borger, "Syria crisis: Obama welcomes Russia's chemical weapons proposal", *The Guardian*, 10 September 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/09/us-russian-proposal-syria-chemical-weapons>

⁴¹ "Framework for Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons", US Department of State, 14 September 2013, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/09/214247.htm>

⁴² Joshua Berlinger, "Syria's chemical weapons destroyed, monitoring group says", *CNN*, 5 June 2014, <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/01/05/middleeast/syria-chemical-weapons/index.html>

⁴³ "Q&A: Syria chemical weapons disarmament deal", *BBC*, 30 January 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-23876085>

ries in the region.⁴⁴ In addition to this, during this time, Obama was trying to design a new Middle East policy, including the nuclear weapons negotiations with Iran. This was another reason that discouraged Obama from a military intervention. While the negotiations with Iran decreased the possibility of a military intervention for the U.S., this situation allowed for Iran to use more aggressive tactics in Syria. This includes adding Hezbollah and many other Shia organizations to work for the maintenance of the Assad regime. Obama's strategy created a major power gap in Syria and this created a threat to other regional countries that were involved in the crisis.

From 2012 onwards, groups that the U.S. listed as terrorist organizations (for instance Hezbollah and Al-Qaeda) began to fight within themselves due to their ideological differences. The civil war in Syria also became an area in which regional countries such as Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia confronted each other. After Russia committed itself to a high-level military engagement in Syria in 2015, Obama stated that "Syria will become Russia's nightmare."⁴⁵ Although Obama was being criticized from within the American establishment, he benefited from the fact that Syria crisis became an arena where U.S. rivals were confronting each other. Although it can be debated as to whether Obama pursued a strategy in order to construct such an atmosphere, it can be stated that his attitude was aggressive.⁴⁶

Obama stated the reason why he did not militarily intervene in the Syria crisis just before his resignation. According to the former U.S. President, although non-interference would have political consequences for the U.S., not intervening was acting in accordance with American interests... A military intervention is usually only accepted in Washington if the U.S. is under a direct threat. However, this belief could have led to wrong decisions being made.⁴⁷ Obama and his administration believed that intervening in Syria was going to cause more grave consequences and feared that engagement would inevitably lead to mission creep, drawing the U.S. into an Afghan-style quagmire.⁴⁸ Engagement was not a viable option for Obama, not only in Syria, but in other places of the world, as he was trying to decrease the cost and level of U.S. engagement across the world.

⁴⁴ Kılıç Buğra Kanat, *A Tale of Four Augusts: Obama's Syria Policy*, İstanbul: SETA Kitapları, 2015, p.68-69

⁴⁵ Kevin Liptak, "Obama: Russia heading for 'quagmire' in Syria", CNN, 2 October 2015, <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/10/02/politics/president-obama-syria-russia-assad/index.html>

⁴⁶ Hasan Basri Yalçın, *Ulusal Güvenlik Stratejisi*, İstanbul: SETA Kitapları, 2017, p.44.

⁴⁷ Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine", *The Atlantic*, April 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>

⁴⁸ Steven Heydeman, "Why United States has not intervened in Syria", *The Washington Post*, 14 March 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/03/14/why-the-united-states-hasnt-intervened-in-syria/?utm_term=.822fa2afb8d0

The murder of U.S. Ambassador to Libya on 11 September 2012 in Benghazi led to the criticism of Obama's policies towards the Arab uprisings. This attack took place in Libya, where the U.S. was helping the opposition topple Gaddafi. This event also caused a risk for Obama's re-election, as it occurred just before the mid-term elections. However, although Obama was elected for his second consecutive term, he did not adopt an interventionist attitude in Syria.

The Fight Against ISIL and the Changing Position of the U.S.

From this date onwards until the emergence of ISIL in 2014, the Obama administration was accused of inaction in the Syria crisis.⁴⁹ ISIL's capture of Mosul in June 2014 not only expanded its sphere of control in Iraq and Syria, but was also a turning point for an international campaign to be organized against the terrorist organization. Obama had ordered airstrikes against the terrorist organization in Iraq, but when American journalist James Foley was brutally murdered and his video leaked to the media in August, the U.S. President launched a comprehensive strategy. On 10 September, 2014, the main aspects of the strategy against ISIL was released. According to this, air strikes against ISIL were to begin, the U.S. was to support countries fighting against the group, in order to prevent ISIL attacks, the regime were to increase counter-terrorism capacities, and finally, help migrants that were displaced from their homes due to ISIL.⁵⁰

It can be stated that this period was the only time that Obama had acted in a consistent manner throughout the beginning of the crisis. More, it can be further stated that this attitude coincided with the approach of the national security strategy published by Obama and that the consistency in his attitude during this time was due to this. This document clearly states the fight against terrorism and that the administration will fight against Al-Qaeda, ISIL and other terrorist organizations.⁵¹ Obama stated that the U.S. would Obama stated that they would fight against terrorism uncompromisingly and acted within this framework. In other words, a strategy based on the concrete goal of eliminating ISIL, which adopted a multilateral approach by working with

⁴⁹ "Obama's legacy will be forever tarnished by his inaction in Syria", The Conversation, 25 November 2016, <http://theconversation.com/obamas-legacy-will-be-forever-tarnished-by-his-inaction-in-syria-67030>

⁵⁰ "Statement by the President on ISIL", 10 September 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/statement-president-isil-1>

⁵¹ "National Security Strategy", February 2015, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy_2.pdf

the international coalition and local forces and which used military instruments was put into action. This strategy was still prevalent after Obama left office in 2016 and it was expected for the next administration to adopt this approach.

Obama's new Syria strategy was based on two foundations. The first is "The Global Coalition Against ISIL," which was launched in September 2014, and which consists of 79 different states and international organizations.⁵² The second leg of the strategy are the military structures on the ground, local government forces, and terrorist organizations. The main function of the coalition was to contribute to air operations. Governments on the ground and non-state actors were the main bodies involved in the clashes. The U.S. forces in the field, whose numbers were decreasing considerably, controlled both coalition and local forces. After the emergence of ISIL, the U.S. armed and organized the PYD – the Syrian wing of the PKK terrorist organization. Although the U.S. organized this group under the umbrella of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), it is well known that the PYD was the main force and that Syrian Arab forces do not have much say. This strategy produced a major cost for Turkey, who is also a coalition partner.

The relationship the U.S. established with the PYD after ISIL's attack on Ayn al-Arab (Kobani) in September 2014,⁵³ had important consequences for Turkey. The Obama administration's withdrawal of help to the Syrian opposition allowed for radical organizations to gain power and for ISIL to settle near Turkey's border. The fact that the U.S. administration used the PYD as a force on the ground against ISIL increased the organization's capabilities, weapon capacity, military education, its ability to increase its financial support, and allowed the organization to obtain de facto control in Syria. This situation meant a multi-layer national security concern for Turkey. The PKK's increasing attacks in Turkey, its "de-facto controlled areas" such as Cizre, Sur, and Nusaybin, and ISIL's attacks both within Turkey and outside were all due to the power gap that was left free in Syria. In other words, the terrorist organizations that emerged in Syria left Turkey face-to-face with a serious risk.

Obama's intention to lead a cost-free maneuverer against the Syria regime became clear in an interview he gave in April 2016. The statement "Erdogan

⁵² <https://theglobalcoalition.org/en/home/>

⁵³ "Battle for Kobane: Key events", 25 June 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29688108>

refused to enter into Syria with his strong army”⁵⁴ is an indication of this. This approach also suited the “rather than intervening in crises, let other international actors take responsibility” attitude of the Obama administration.⁵⁵

Since the beginning of the Syria crisis in March 2011, although Obama constructed discourse that created an expectancy of military intervention against the Assad regime, a strategy following suit never occurred. More so, Obama’s lack of a strategy became clear as the discourse he adopted throughout the crisis was not constructed in parallel to the reactions that his administration gave to events. This is something that caused the further deepening of the crisis. As the crisis deepened, the risks that the Obama administration had to encounter increased and the possibility of an intervention became more difficult. This situation is especially true for the first two periods that are assessed in this paper. Although the U.S. administration worked to eliminate the Assad regime from chemical weapons, it never followed as to whether they were successful in this objective or not. The only time that the Obama administration acted within a concrete strategy was when it put into action its fight against ISIL. The reason why Obama acted in this manner in the Syria crisis was a matter of debate for a long time. This paper has argued that the reason why Obama hesitated to and did not intervene in the Syria crisis was because the U.S. President wanted to avoid high costs. Although Obama described the use of chemical weapons as the “red line,” his discourse on trying to push the matter as an international one and later accepting Putin’s proposal are indicators of this very finding.

Conclusion

This study has periodized the Obama administration’s attitude towards the Syria crisis and has explained how the administration’s policies changed over the 6 year period in concern. In this regard, the article has divided Obama’s Syria policy to three different periods and three different discourses. The first period was when expectations on the Assad regime listening to the demands of the opposition were high. The statement that if the Assad regime does not fulfill these demands it “will have to move from the way” created an expectancy that the U.S. administration could militarily intervene in the crisis. Rather than forming a rapprochement with the opposition,

⁵⁴ Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine”, *The Atlantic*, April 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>

⁵⁵ Hasan B. Yalçın, “Obama Stratejisi Ve Ortadoğu”, *Akademik ORTA DOĞU*, Volume 9, No 2, 2015, 55-74.

the Assad regime increased its repressive handling of the protests and this created a change in the Obama administration's discourse. From this point onwards, the possibility of a U.S. military intervention became more debated. However, Obama avoided taking a step in this regard and labeled the use of chemical weapons as a red line. Although the Assad regime used chemical weapons in August 2013, the Obama administration repeatedly avoided intervention. Even when operation plans were being discussed, after this two-year period, it became clear that the Obama administration will not resort to military intervention.

By avoiding a military intervention, the U.S. administration caused the Syria crisis to evolve into a multi-layer and multi-actor crisis. Dragging the country into a vortex meant groups that the U.S. defined as terrorist organizations fighting each other and U.S. rivals losing energy in Syria. The fighting between groups associated with Hezbollah and Al-Qaeda and the heated tension between countries such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey, who were active in the crisis, strengthened the U.S.' arm against these actors.

It is possible to state that the U.S. avoidance of a military intervention against the Assad regime caused the Syria crisis to evolve onto a different level, which led to two important consequences. The first was the strengthening of non-state actors in Syria both in terms of power and authority after 2014. This situation is not only applicable to ISIL and groups affiliated to Al-Qaeda, but other groups such as Hezbollah and PYD. As the U.S. took steps to stop the expansion of ISIL, it opened the pathway of growth for the PYD.

The second important consequence of Obama's policies is the fact that it allowed for Russia and Iran to increase their support for the Assad regime in the name of fighting terrorism. In this respect, it can be observed that the U.S. was forced to make a choice between either terrorist organizations or the Assad regime for the future of Syria. In such an atmosphere, the opposition was dismantled into many different small groups and slowly lost its control of many areas. Looking at the map of Syria as the Obama reign came to an end, it can be seen that while the East of the Euphrates was in the hands of ISIL and the PYD, the West of the Euphrates was dominated by the Assad regime, which gained control due to the help of the Iran and Russia regimes – even if this meant leading to civilians being displaced.

Within this chaos, the Obama administration done something very important that it had never done so before. It put into action a concrete strate-

gy in the fight against ISIL. The main aim of this strategy was to eliminate ISIL. A military method was adopted and an international coalition was formed, which would work with local forces. One important consequence of Obama's fight against terrorism was that it changed Turkey's approach to the Syria crisis. This strategy of the U.S. President created grave consequences for Turkey. Among these include the PKK's de-facto rule and self-declared autonomy in areas in Syria, the end of the "peace process" in Turkey and the fact that it wanted to cause a similar situation occurring in Syria in Turkey. In addition to these can be listed the fact that ISIL had settled on the Turkish border and that the group conducted many attacks both within and outside of Turkey's borders. All of these caused a serious threat to Turkey's national security. The fact that the 15 July military coup attempt occurred within this atmosphere is also not a coincidence. Its only after defeating this coup attempt that the Turkish government was able to fully operate against these threats and begin to obtain some outcomes. Finally, Turkey's attempt to find a new solution to the crisis through the Astana process with Russia can be stated as a mandatory consequence of the options made by the U.S. in the Syria crisis.

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