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American Exceptionalism in Syria: The Faith and the Heresy

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It is no wonder that U.S. President Barack Obama took shelter in a long view of history as he prepared to hand over power to then U.S. President-elect Donald J. Trump. “For every two steps forward, it often feels we take one step back,” Obama conceded during his farewell speech in Chicago on January 10, 2017. “But the long sweep of America has been defined by forward motion, a constant widening of our founding creed to embrace all, and not just some.”¹

He could see an ominous step back lurking just around the corner, and only the “long

sweep” could rescue his legacy from the incoming administration. He spoke of the spirit of America, “born of the Enlightenment,” that has allowed it to “resist the lure of fascism and tyranny.” Echoing President Woodrow Wilson’s idea of universal law,² he spoke of a post-World War II order “based not just on military power or national affiliations, but built on principles.”³

And ten days later, President Obama handed over the world order to President Trump. “From this day forward,” said Trump, “a new vision will govern our land. From this day forward, it’s going to be only America first.”⁴

The bumpy transition had turned into a holy war of words. Obama recited the creed of American exceptionalism and upheld the

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image of America as an enlightened global leader destined to lead for the good of all humanity. Trump appealed to nationalism—pure and simple.

Amid their historic duel, the two men appeared to be in agreement on one thing, in substance if not in style.

“We have taken out tens of thousands of terrorists—including Bin Laden,” said Obama. “The global coalition we’re leading against ISIL has taken out their leaders and taken away about half their territory. ISIL will be destroyed, and no one who threatens America will ever be safe.”

With a measure of stylistic innovation and a minor policy tweak, Trump picked up where Obama left off: “We will reinforce old alliances and form new ones—and unite the civilized world against radical Islamic terrorism, which we will eradicate completely from the face of the earth.”

Obama in Syria

Under Barack Obama, the United States launched two wars in Syria: a proxy war against the Syrian regime and a direct war against ISIS and other transnational jihadists. When it came to ISIS, Obama articulated his policy relatively bluntly and with less contradiction than his statements about Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

One of the best examples emerges from Jeffrey Goldberg’s piece “The Obama Doctrine” for *The Atlantic*. Goldberg cites Obama using a Batman movie analogy to explain his problem with ISIS:⁵

“There’s a scene in the beginning in which the gang leaders of Gotham are meeting,” the President would say. “These are men who had the city divided up. They were thugs, but there was a kind of order. Everyone had his turf. And then the Joker comes in and lights the whole city on fire. ISIL is the Joker.

It has the capacity to set the whole region on fire. That’s why we have to fight it.”

Much of the handwringing about Obama’s ISIS policy seems to unwittingly point to his success. One idea mainstreamed by some of his critics is that the fight against ISIS “has become a vehicle and a guise for all actors to pursue their competing interests,” and that the weakening of ISIS is accompanied by the “resurfacing, often in more potent ways, of past fault lines.”⁶

But that is precisely the point as far as Obama was concerned. The problem ISIS posed to him was that it upset the past fault lines: “Everyone had his turf. And then the Joker comes in and lights the whole city on fire.”⁷

Furthermore, the regional competition seemed to have served U.S. purposes, not obstructed them, and fit well with Obama’s views on the efficient use of power.

Obama seemed to see himself as something of a shadow operator. In Libya, he let Sarkozy brag about his role in the war, while he would “purchase France’s involvement in a way that made it less expensive for us and less risky for us.”⁸

If he can do it to friends, better still to opponents and enemies. Let Iran and Russia take as much of the burden as possible; he wanted to minimize expense and avoid taking the brunt of a ground operation.⁹

“Real power,” he told Goldberg, “means you can get what you want without having to exert violence.”¹⁰

But realists, too, are unsure what to make of Obama. Some seem happy that he articulated ideas that they see fit into a realist school of foreign policy,¹¹ while others are disappointed that he neither articulated them enough nor succeeded in putting them into practice.

Stephen Walt is vocal among the latter, and he pays particular attention to Obama’s rhetoric. “This most articulate of presidents,” he said, “never articu-

lated a clear and coherent framework identifying vital U.S. interests.”¹²

Obama’s belief in American exceptionalism and “his tendency to recite the familiar rhetoric of liberal hegemony,” according to Walt, made him more liable to intervene where U.S. interests were not at stake.¹³

It seemed easily predictable Obama would not dwell on Syria in a farewell speech meant in large part to imprint his legacy. Syria does not seem to fit in his stories about American exceptionalism, and there is little about it to inspire on an occasion that demanded nothing but inspiration.

But exceptionalism is more than just a mask; it is a national faith that extends beyond the president and the foreign policy establishment and often permeates Western institutions of knowledge.

As America offered a hand to the Syrian uprising, a lot of mainstream media would mistake the posture for policy and entire narratives would be built about a heartbroken United States facing another moral dilemma. A familiar kind of angst would resurface in the collective imagination: A lament that America’s idealistic aspirations for a better global order have been thwarted, and the faith of American exceptionalism has not been upheld. And if the goals are so sublime and the result so tragic, the only conclusion is that American policymakers do not know what they are doing.¹⁴

The Outstretched Hand

Syria had its first encounter with American exceptionalism during Woodrow Wilson’s presidency. “If the people truly want independence,” he was said to have told King Faisal in 1919,¹⁵ “then I will not allow any country in the world to control Syria!”¹⁶

Wilson sent Charles Crane and Henry King¹⁷ to gauge the public mood in Syria, in line with his new idea of national self-determination for people

ruled by European powers. But soon enough after the King-Crane Commission, Faisal “met with reality”¹⁸ when he realized that despite “all efforts at pleasing Wilson... he [Faisal] was going to lose both Palestine and Syria...”¹⁹

The Syrian historian Sami Moubayed offers a less-known sequel to the famous story—an unintended but telling episode that would display the enduring power of the Wilsonian pull.

Just three years later, in 1922, Crane decided to return to Syria. Although it was a private visit, Abd al-Rahman Shahbandar, who used to be Faisal’s right-hand man, was filled with hope again.


“He has the ear of influential members of Congress,” Shahbandar would tell skeptics who were suspicious and fearful they would be sold another illusion. “We must show him around, and he must see the damage done by the French, to convey it to the US government!”²⁰

Crane had nothing to offer to Syria, but he entrusted Shahbandar with money to give to two Syrian activists should they accept an offer for scholarships in the United States. Shahbandar was “clapped in chains the minute Crane left Damascus,” accused of receiving money from the United States to topple the French mandate, and sentenced to 20 years of hard labor.²¹

In search of one of the activists, the French arrested a student and “locked her up for two hours in an empty tomb” to get information, took her to a prison “in a state of collapse,” and then proceeded to arrest dozens of Syrians active in opposing French rule who had taken to the streets in protest.²²

By virtue of his association with U.S. power, and the perception that he had access, Crane set off an unforeseen chain of events. Although we can rule out intent of influence with near certainty, intentions in this case did not really matter.

Fast forward to August 18, 2011. Unlike Wilson’s America, the United States had been for a long time



the dominant world power with global interests and long-standing intent to shape events in line with its interests. The intoxicating effect of a string of revolts against life-long dictators in Arab countries was fresh, the United States was militarily involved in a new, thinly veiled regime-change venture in Libya, and a popular uprising was underway in Syria.

“For the sake of the Syrian people” declared then U.S. President Barack Obama, “the time has come for President Assad to step aside.”²³

Into America’s Orbit

This time the pull was deliberately sustained. After Obama’s declaration came a string of high-profile international conferences under the enticing headline “Friends of Syria,” announcements and anonymous leaks of overt and covert support, and continuous moral proclamations about legitimacy.

With hindsight, all this may appear hollow, but hindsight can deceive. “Not knowing how it is all going to end is the mark of living through events,” writes the American philosopher Arthur Danto, in *Narration and Knowledge*.²⁴ These statements and conferences may have turned out to be hollow, but that was not apparent at the time.

Obama later described his statement as nothing more than a moral judgment about how leaders should treat their people. But he was neither a parish priest nor a professor of ethics when he made it, and it was bound to have an effect on the calculations of all actors in the region.²⁵ A significant segment of the Syrian uprising was gravitating into America’s orbit;

increasingly counting on U.S. support, and acting on the expectation that Washington would deliver the needed help to overthrow the regime and seize power in Syria. Back in 2011, this would not necessarily have been a stupid calculation.

Of the Crane episode in 1922, Moubayed writes that it reveals how Syrians saw the United States “as a mystical, distant country that could somehow miraculously end all their troubles,” and Crane as “a knight in shining armor, coming to the Oriental East to save the Arabs from European colonialism, seemingly wanting nothing in return.”²⁶

It would be a step too far to imagine that Syrian politicians and activists in 2011 had similar illusions. It is more likely that they made calculations based not just on statements and conferences and other displays of intent to remove Assad, but also on readings of long-standing U.S. policy toward Syria and Iran.

The undercurrent of hostility to Iran’s regional influence and Syria’s role in enabling it was still potent in Washington, even after the exit of Obama’s predecessor, President George W. Bush.

Early on in the uprising, in November 2011, then-Assistant Secretary of State Jeffrey Feltman told

senators that a new government in Syria “is not going to be the asset for Iran that Syria is today,” adding, “[i]t is in our strategic interest to see that this change takes place quickly.”²⁷

In the same hearing, Senator Marco Rubio twice asked Feltman whether he thought that the loss of the Assad regime would be a “devastating blow to

“For the sake of the Syrian people” declared then U.S. President Barack Obama, “the time has come for President Assad to step aside.”

Iran,” and Feltman assured him that he thought it would.²⁸

On and Off the Record

“There will be increasingly capable opposition forces. They will from somewhere, somehow, find the means to defend themselves as well as begin offensive measures.” – U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, February 23, 2012.²⁹

A sense of inevitability grew that Assad was on his way out, and the CIA set up two operations rooms in Jordan and Turkey.³⁰ U.S. allies ran an airlift of weapons,³¹ and a former U.S. official told the *New York Times* that David Petraeus, who was CIA director until November 2012, had been “instrumental in helping to get this aviation network moving.”³²

As they calculated the flow of arms, the Americans kept one eye on Iran and Hezbollah, and another on international jihadist factions fighting against the regime.³³

“It was never our goal to quickly topple the regime,” former U.S. Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford told me in a November 2016 interview, “because how would you topple it without direct U.S. military intervention? And no one in the administration, not me, not Clinton, not Petraeus, not anyone wanted U.S. direct military intervention. No one did.”

So the argument for more weapons, I asked, was always about a better negotiating position and never about regime change?

“Correct. I’m surprised that’s not already clear from the record,” said Ford.³⁴

Ford stresses the record on negotiations, as well as on the start of U.S. aid, which he says was “too little too late.”³⁵ But everyone knows that there was a covert operation that was not on the record.³⁶ And even on the record, things do not seem as clear as Ford implies. While it is true that in many official public statements, U.S. officials emphasized a negotiated political solution, this was always a phrase of such elasticity that it was almost meaningless.³⁷


And American official statements were often phrased to imply different things; in February 2013, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry would say “the totality of this effort,” related to U.S. and allied aid for the rebels,

would “have an impact on the ability of the Syrian opposition to accomplish its goals.”³⁸ There was never much doubt that for most of the rebels this would have meant toppling the regime. But does that reveal intent to help them achieve their aims, or was it just another official announcement to keep them in orbit?

Obama and the Washington Playbook

Before the Syrian uprising, Obama’s first step in Syria was a move away from George W. Bush’s posture that once bordered on regime change. Obama seemed to drift toward normalizing ties with Syria,³⁹

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and indicated he would change tactics when dealing with Iran.⁴⁰

But while presidents can change direction, they do not re-author policy from scratch; the uprising in Syria breathed new life into the policy that had lain dormant even as Obama made moves to change it. Although advocating Bush-style regime change was almost politically impossible in Washington throughout Obama's two terms,⁴¹ the uprising presented an opportunity for a proxy war on the cheap.

Obama chose his battles on foreign policy carefully and pragmatically. When it came to what he perceived as threats and interests, such as the proliferation of chemical weapons in Syria and the nuclear deal with Iran, he would face down the various forces hostile to Iran in Washington and deal with the issue his own way. But a proxy war was different—there were no American lives at stake and no costly no-fly zones to pay for, just a flow of mostly Gulf-funded weapons into Syria, under the gaze of the CIA. Although Obama later indicated he did not think it was going to change “the equation on the ground,” he decided to let them have it.⁴²

But even if all of Obama's intentions were to be somehow magically revealed, we still would not be able to appreciate the historical significance of his actions.⁴³ In history, more than anything, “our criteria for assessing performances are by and large behavioristic.”⁴⁴ What Obama *intended* to do would certainly enrich the record,⁴⁵ but a question of higher historical interest is what *America ended up doing*.

Civil War within a Civil War (within a Civil War)

There they were: the Syrian rebel factions America had pulled into orbit, at war with the unrestrained machinery of the Syrian state. And there, too, were

Hezbollah and the Iranians, Iraqi militias aligned to Iran, as well as ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and a pool of international jihadists, all fighting in one place. Even united, it was not clear the rebels could win; without unity, they stood little chance of survival.

The American dilemma lay in the overlap between the rebel factions they supported and the transnational jihadist factions, especially but not exclusively ISIS. Unlike nationalist rebel proxies and some other Salafi groups, the transnational jihadists could not be co-opted by the United States or even its Gulf allies.

The dilemma for the opposition was to manage the fault-lines in such a way to achieve rebel unity in the middle of the war. The task was complicated by the nature of the broader division between seculars and Islamists, which is often woven into the fabric of society,⁴⁶ with vaguely defined contours.

The United States resolved its dilemma by applying a “peeling policy” to its proxies,⁴⁷ marginalizing fighters it deemed undesirable or a threat. It would exert constant pressure on its loyal factions to separate from other groups. The United States' distrust of the rebels and their base would color the relationship from the start and highlight an apparent contradiction in U.S. policy. To ensure loyalty in their proxies, the Americans sacrificed rebel unity and encouraged rebel infighting.⁴⁸

The Americans also monitored the race between different rebel groups to provide services, as a measure of local support, and steered aid to balance it in favor of its chosen factions.⁴⁹

The opposition body recognized by the West and Gulf states as representatives of the Syrian people would play a helping role, while maintaining an indignant posture.⁵⁰ In public, a now-familiar dynamic unfolded: The United States was constantly concerned, donor nations would continuously press the rebel groups to “separate themselves from what some of the extreme elements are doing,”⁵¹ and the

opposition would perpetually plead for weapons, promising not to misuse them.⁵²

But as the Americans armed the rebels to counter Iran and Hezbollah, Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS were proving more effective on the ground. Little by little, the United States shifted its balancing strategy toward a stronger focus on weakening the transnational jihadists, effectively taking a load off the regime and its allies. And in 2014, the strategy would swing almost full force as ISIS advanced and America decided to step in directly.

The War on Terror Proliferates

Only one year had passed since Obama's sudden and dramatic turnabout on striking Assad, which interventionists lamented as a crippling blow to U.S. power and credibility.⁵³ Yet at the first sign that U.S. power was about to be deployed in Syria as a new extension of America's "War on Terror," the Syrian regime would promptly signal to America that it would like cooperate.⁵⁴

Officially, the Americans rejected the offer. But even as the rebels, plagued by infighting, were pulled further apart, the United States, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, a collection of Western countries, and later, Russia, were all sharing the skies over rebel-held areas and conducting their respective "Wars on Terror."

Battered and besieged, U.S. proxies would now be reconfigured for the United States' new fight; the Americans started steering⁵⁵ them from fighting the regime to fighting transnational jihadists, particularly ISIS. Some rebels were suspicious, but their margin of choice was getting narrower and narrower.

"We need more focus on our fronts with the regime," one rebel, who was not receiving U.S. sup-

port, would tell me as the Americans started bombing in northern Syria. "We cannot be distracted by the Daesh [ISIS] front and allow the regime to advance."

The alluring Wilsonian pull had turned into a grip of steel, and U.S. help was becoming conditional on surrendering the very aim for which the rebels had risked, and perhaps lost, almost everything.


Russia entered the battleground directly in 2015 and let loose an aerial campaign against rebel-held areas in its own "War on Terror." As mass misery unfolded in its wake, the United States would present an indignant posture.⁵⁶ But the main dynamic of the new global "War on Terror" was clear: Between the Russian and Syrian governments and the Western-led coalition, it was open season from the skies on the fractured rebel base.

Off and Onshore Balancing

Writing in nostalgic praise of the realist creed, Paul Pillar looks back to the time when the United States practiced "offshore balancing" during the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s.⁵⁷

"When it appeared that Iraq would have difficulty keeping up the fight, the Reagan administration tilted toward Baghdad," he recalled. "It would be better from the standpoint of U.S. interests and the prevention of anyone gaining regional hegemony to have both sides suffer from an exhausting stalemate."

It was "offshore" because the United States tilted the balance by means other than direct military intervention. But the policy is flexible; Pillar suggests that George H.W. Bush was still broadly within offshore balancing when he went to war with Iraq over its invasion of Kuwait. The war was simply "recognition that occasionally even an offshore balancer has to come onshore to do the balancing."⁵⁸



Obama appears to have practiced some such blend of onshore and offshore balancing policy in Syria and Iraq, drawing insight from the Iran-Iraq War itself. The ISIS advance, he told the *New York Times* in July 2015, makes it difficult for Iran “to sustain a buffer, which has always been a significant motivator for them since the Iraq-Iran War.”⁵⁹

Iran’s sphere of influence in Iraq and perhaps its internal security were at threat, and Obama knew it; he would benefit from Iranian blood and treasure to minimize his own intervention so that ISIS can be contained at minimum cost, risk, and visibility for America, and with maximum impact.⁶⁰

Pillar says that instead of fretting about Iran’s role in the region, critics of Obama should “quietly” welcome “the expenditure of blood and treasure” by Iran as it does “heavy lifting in combating someone like ISIS.”⁶¹

The key word is “quietly.” Realism guides the practice of policy, not its articulation—this is a sacred rule adhered to even by America’s most realist of presidents.⁶²

Corks and Scorpions

America’s balancing games across the Middle East echo an older tradition of balancing rooted in its “mother country.” In centuries past, Great Britain would aim to balance the European powers against each other in order to maintain supremacy at sea and ensure no European power could challenge it.⁶³ Two schools of thought on how to achieve the balance would fight it out in London. One argued that “Great Britain should engage itself only when the

balance was actually threatened, and then only long enough to remove the threat.” The other argued for a more aggressive policy, that “Great Britain’s main duty was to *shape* and not simply to protect the balance of power.”⁶⁴

Walter Russell Mead offers a livelier, more graphic description. As seen from the British Isles, continental Europe was a bottle, and European pow-

ers were scorpions inside the bottle, fighting each other.⁶⁵ One view was to maintain a strong navy and simply “cork the bottle so that none of the scorpions could crawl out, and Britain would be secure.” The other was that Britain needed to “maintain the

capacity to intervene in the Continental wars, to prevent any scorpion from devouring the rest and growing strong enough to push the cork out of the way and climb out of the bottle.”⁶⁶

Henry Kissinger points out that these differences were “practical, not philosophical; tactical, not strategic.”⁶⁷

The same might be said of the different varieties of balancing America applied in the region. Pillar says that offshore balancing “died in stages” after the Iran-Iraq War. President George H.W. Bush’s war on Iraq was an act of onshore balancing within a broader offshore policy, President Bill Clinton’s “dual containment” of Iraq and Iran was also a step away from offshore balancing, and President George W. Bush would discard the notion of balancing altogether and send the army to impose an American order directly.

It appears Obama attempted to take a step back from George W. Bush to George H.W. Bush, perhaps ending up somewhere between George

“...in 2014, the strategy would swing almost full force as ISIS advanced and America decided to step in directly.”

W. Bush and Bill Clinton. But why did America's balance tilt so drastically from targeting the Syrian regime, Hezbollah, and Iran to targeting ISIS and the pool of international jihadists who came to Syria to fight Assad?

Many labels have been attached to Syrian rebel groups as the war dragged on; secular and Islamist, extremist and moderate, sectarian and inclusive. But none of the above explains America's standards as it weighed its peeling

policy.⁶⁸ A more useful distinction to understand U.S. behavior is that between national and transnational rebels. ISIS sought to destroy borders and create a larger entity; if it were to keep expanding, or even consolidate its territorial gains, it would not only have threatened Damascus and Baghdad, but possibly Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Gulf, not to mention North Africa.

In other words, ISIS made a dash for the cork, pulling America onshore to knock it back into the bottle.

Obama in History

"The whole truth concerning an event can only be known after, and sometimes only *long* after the event itself has taken place, and this part of the story historians alone can tell."⁶⁹ Arthur Danto, *Narration and Knowledge*

It might be said that the United States lost its proxy war against the Syrian regime and won its open war against ISIS. The various coalitions that fought ISIS have indeed managed to contain it into a smaller area than that it had expanded to in summer

2014, which Obama can claim for his record as commander-in-chief. But ISIS and its predecessors have survived tough conditions before, long enough to pounce on the opportunity that presented itself after the Syrian uprising and


then expand exponentially. That does not necessarily mean it will happen again, but it might.

On Assad, let us assume that some of those in Washington who pushed for action intended to swiftly knock down his regime, while others envisaged an open-ended war of attrition that draws in the Iranians and Hezbollah and bleeds them in Syria.⁷⁰

The most likely long-term intention in both cases would have been to strike a blow at the links that bind Iran, Hezbollah, and Syria, and to weaken the entire alliance, an enduring U.S. purpose. So to the extent that Iran ended up more entrenched in Syria after the proxy war, the outcome would signal a loss for America. But here, too, the outcome is not final, not just because the war has not necessarily ended, but also because it must have already transformed the regime in ways we cannot understand now.

But to speak of victory and defeat in the proxy war is to neglect a glaring asymmetry of interests⁷¹ and investments in Syria. While the United States

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invested very little in the war, Damascus and its allies sustained vast losses. Obama made two major inputs into the covert operation against Assad that seem to have significantly affected events in Syria after the uprising; he authorized it, and then he set about making sure it never developed into a costlier entanglement. It was a cheap, opportunistic gamble for America and a long, bloody war for the regime, the rebels, and the rest of Syria.

The Syrian war remains an unfolding story, a story that awaits completion. In Syria we are dealing not only with events, but with “fragments of events” that occupy a most mysterious space in time;⁷² we cannot fully know the fragments that are past before knowing the fragments that are still to pass. But Obama seemed impatient; he had his eyes set on his history even before he started making it. As he entered office, he invited presidential historians to the White House for dinner, and three years into his first term, he was already rating himself against other presidents.⁷³

Although his second term is over, the historical contest is only just starting. At times, Barack Obama was Woodrow Wilson, speaking of morals and ideals, the arc of history, and America’s forward motion. At others, he was Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, playing a balancing game. But even George H.W. Bush was sometimes Wilsonian,⁷⁴ and Reagan sounded so idealistic that he had his own unique “variant of American exceptionalism.”⁷⁵

In a way, even the rise of Donald Trump, whose rhetoric borders on heresy from various standpoints of U.S. exceptionalism, testifies to the reach of the exceptionalist faith. After all, some of those Americans who so desperately wanted to hear their president say “America first” might have thought that the United States has *not* been first in the past;

that it has indeed put some idea of global welfare ahead of consolidating and expanding its power.

Beyond a certain point, the labels stop making sense; they imply contradiction—a continuum with two polar opposites that never meet and are always in conflict. But in the long sweep of the United States, realism and idealism have marched together, gracefully intertwined as the former guides the country in action and the latter bestows a saintly glitter on everything she does.

The Future

On February 10 and 11, 2017, two rival Syrian coalitions laid out their positions on upcoming talks in Geneva; one group, meeting in Riyadh, wants Assad to go, while the other announced from Beirut that the Syrian presidency is not up for discussion at the conference.

The newly formed Beirut group appears to be a facade for the Syrian regime and the Russians; it seems to be aimed at reinforcing the regime’s talking points from a nominally independent standpoint. The Riyadh group is an extension of the opposition coalition that has served as a front for Gulf Arab monarchies and Western countries throughout the war, targeting Hezbollah and, later, al-Nusra and ISIS.

They may all be just puppets on a string, but they reflect a real struggle involving Russia, Iran, the Gulf monarchies, and Turkey over who controls Syria. The positions are constantly shifting, with Russia and Turkey momentarily closer than ever before, and Iran slightly further from Russia than it was in the past.

Meanwhile, somewhere in Syria, Hashem al-Sheikh announced the formation of a new group, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (the committee for the liberation of Syria/the Levant), a merger between Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra) and other groups.⁷⁶

“The page shall not turn upon al-Sham (Syria or the Levant),” he declared, “not through negotiations, nor through some conference that aborts the revolution and crowns the butcher.”

Although al-Nusra started as a proxy of what used to be the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), the two diverged more than anything over priorities, with al-Nusra maintaining a fierce, unflinching focus on toppling the regime. In that sense, the fighters of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham are today the last rebels standing.

The Americans remain focused on the transnational jihadists and Iran's regional reach. Under

Obama, it was the former more than the latter. Under Trump, it is too early to tell, but he appears to be taking a more aggressive stance toward Iran, especially as the scope of ISIS's territorial control, a main driver of tacit coordination between the United States and Iran, diminishes.

Be that as it may, Washington's enemies remain locked in mortal combat, a condition which lends itself to more balancing games. In a way, Obama has handed Trump a situation that reflects his own preferred scenario—one in which minimal investment is required to achieve American purposes.

It remains to be seen whether the current administration is as inclined to that approach as the former was, but as long as the region-wide sectarian split endures, Washington will have ample opportunity to maintain control from a comfortable distance, with just enough intervention to keep its enemies contained as they bleed each other.

Endnotes

- 1 President Barack Obama. Farewell address. McCormick Place, Chicago. January 10, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/10/us/politics/obama-farewell-address-speech.html>.
- 2 “In Wilson’s first State of the Union Address, on December 2, 1913, he laid down the outline of what later came to be known as Wilsonianism. Universal law and not equilibrium, national trustworthiness and not national self-assertion were, in Wilson’s view, the foundations of international order.” Kissinger, Henry. *Diplomacy*. Touchstone, 1995. p.44.
- 3 President Barack Obama. Farewell address.
- 4 President Donald Trump. Inaugural address. The United States Capitol, Washington, D.C. January 20, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/01/20/donald-trumps-full-inauguration-speech-transcript-annotated/?utm_term=.a7fca723e053.
- 5 According to Goldberg, Obama made the comparison in conversations with advisers. Goldberg, Jeffrey. “The Obama Doctrine.” *The Atlantic* 10 (2016). April 2016. <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.
- 6 Hokayem, Emile. “The end of the Islamic State will make the Middle East worse.” *The Washington Post*. October 28, 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/10/28/the-end-of-the-islamic-state-will-make-the-middle-east-worse/?utm_term=.13455c4ebbc7. Similarly, Joseph Micalle said that ‘Byzantine political maneuvering’ is set to continue. Micalle, Joseph. “The Race to Raqqa: The Next Russian-American Proxy Battle?” *The Huffington Post*. May 29, 2016. <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joseph-v-micallef/the-race-to-raqqa-the-next-battle-10193766.html>. Notice the bar for success implied by such attacks on Obama’s strategy; Obama was supposed not just to fight IS, and get other powers to fight IS, but to get these powers to *love one another* first. These are examples of how the assumptions underlying American exceptionalism seep into analysis; the implication is that America is a force of such inherent goodness that its military interventions must lead to positive transformation in order to be counted as successful. This kind of analysis is pervasive even in some Arab media, testifying to the global reach of American exceptionalism.
- 7 Goldberg, Jeffrey. The Obama Doctrine.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 For Obama as well as Congress, a military entanglement, even without boots on the ground, could have been politically damaging. In December 2013, the Washington Post reported: “Americans appear to be less interested in U.S. foreign engagement than at any other time over the last half-century, judging by a Pew poll that has been measuring U.S. public opinion since 1964. The poll found an all-time low in public support for an active U.S. foreign policy, as well as a growing desire to focus away from the world stage.” Fisher, Max. “American isolationism just hit a 50-year high. Why that matters.” *The Washington Post*. December 4, 2013. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2013/12/04/american-isolationism-just-hit-a-50-year-high-why-that-matters/?utm_term=.f2b58689d722.
- 10 Goldberg, Jeffrey. “The Obama Doctrine.”
- 11 Pillar, Paul. “Obama the Realist.” *The National Interest*. March 12, 2016. <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/paul-pillar/obama-the-realist-15479>. See also Pillar, Paul. “The Forgotten Benefits of Offshore Balancing.” *The National Interest*. January 27, 2016. <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/paul-pillar/the-forgotten-benefits-offshore-balancing-15035>.
- 12 Walt, Stephen. “Obama was not a realist President.” *Foreign Policy*. April 7, 2016. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/04/07/obama-was-not-a-realist-president-jeffrey-goldberg-atlantic-obama-doctrine/>.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Some commentators seem to assume Obama administration policymakers do not understand such basic things as other nations acting in defense of their geopolitical interests: “The belief that Russia valued U.S. and international good will more than its hard geopolitical interests,” wrote the Atlantic Council, “turned out to be wrong.” Itani, Faysal, and Hossam Abouzahr. “Lessons from Russia’s Intervention in Syria.” *Atlantic Council*. October 26, 2016. <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriacouncil/lessons-from-russia-s-intervention-in-syria>.
- 15 Sharif Faisal, son of Sharif Hussein, “the leader of the Arab Revolt against the Ottomans in 1916-1918,” had been “proclaimed the first Arab ruler of Syria after 400 years of Ottoman rule.” Moubayed, Sami. *Syria and the USA: Washington’s Relations with Damascus From Wilson to Eisenhower*. IB Tauris, 2012. p. 14.
- 16 Ibid. p. 14.
- 17 Ibid.: “King was an educator who taught theology and philosophy at Oberlin College, while Crane was a wealthy philanthropist who knew the Middle East.”
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ibid. pp. 16-19. Moubayed writes that Faisal had hoped to win Syria by compromising on Palestine: “Arab Historians who have tackled Wilson’s relationship with Emir Faisal have often glossed over the US president’s unwavering support for Zionism. ...Shahbandar, well-versed in American politics, knew Wilson presented a double-edged sword for the Arabs. His support did not come in one piece- sovereignty in Syria had to be at the expense of the future of Palestine. This was a price both Shahbandar and Faisal seemed willing to pay for the sake of establishing a Hashemite monarchy in Damascus. [...] Shahbandar tried to tell the Emir that he must push for Syria first, and let the Palestinians worry about Palestine. Opposing the Balfour declaration was unwise, he claimed, calling

- on the Emir to reach a deal with the Zionist Commission President, Chaim Weizmann, who was representing the Zionists in Paris. ...But just weeks after signing the agreement with Weizmann, Faisal met with reality in Paris, when he realized that no matter how hard he tried, both the Balfour Declaration and the Sykes-Picot Agreement were going ahead. Despite all efforts at pleasing Wilson, he was going to lose both Palestine and Syria and nobody – neither Wilson nor Weizmann – were seriously going to challenge the agreement that gave the French government a mandate in Syria.”
- 20 Ibid. p. 24.
- 21 Ibid. pp. 28; 30. “Shahbandar served 17 months in jail, along with all those who had facilitated Crane’s visit.”
- 22 Ibid. Regardless of Crane’s visit, the conditions for these clashes were there. To the extent that Syrians were opposed to French rule, they had cause to resist it, and to the extent that the French wished to maintain their rule, they had cause to oppress them. But the trigger for these specific events was Crane’s visit (and the subsequent arrest of Shahbandar). Here we can distinguish underlying causes from causes of the more immediate kind.
- 23 Goldberg, Jeffrey. “The Obama Doctrine.”
- 24 Danto, Arthur. *Narration and Knowledge*. Colombia University Press, 2007. p. 294. Here, Danto further writes: “Sympathetically to try to attain an internal understanding of those events requires...in effect, an erasure of the subsequent record (forgetting the future, as it were), a deliberate holding of it in abeyance; therefore, this is an impossible demand. We simply know too much to be able to attain that state of innocence of the future – and hence of the present, since it is the future that will retroactively give a shape and color to the present – which those who lived through events must be supposed to have had. Not knowing how it is all going to end is the mark of living through events.” Although he was discussing the possibility of historical understanding of other periods we have not lived through, the point that holds here is that our view of the events *as they were unfolding* in 2011 is different from our view now, when the “erasure of the subsequent record,” of what we know *now*, has become impossible.
- 25 He also seemed to imply, unconvincingly, that the only possible critique of his statement is the hyper-interventionist critique: “Ofentimes when you get critics of our Syria policy, one of the things that they’ll point out is ‘You called for Assad to go, but you didn’t force him to go. You did not invade.’ And the notion is that if you weren’t going to overthrow the regime, you shouldn’t have said anything. That’s a weird argument to me, the notion that if we use our moral authority to say ‘This is a brutal regime, and this is not how a leader should treat his people,’ once you do that, you are obliged to invade the country and install a government you prefer.” Goldberg, Jeffrey. “The Obama Doctrine.”
- 26 Moubayed, Sami. *Syria and the USA: Washington’s Relations with Damascus From Wilson to Eisenhower*. p.31.
- 27 Jeffrey Feltman, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs at the “Hearing Before the Subcommittee on the Near Eastern and South Central Asian Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate.” November 9, 2011. <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-112shrg73917/pdf/CHRG-112shrg73917.pdf>. He added: “What is happening on the ground in Syria is quite interesting because as our Embassy—and I thank you all for the comments on Ambassador Ford which, of course, we certainly all endorse. Our Embassy reports—it also comes in through other channels—that these demonstrations across Syria have, among other demands, an anti-Hezbollah, anti-Iran flavor to them.”
- 28 Senator Marco Rubio. In Ibid. The exchange between Rubio and Feltman further reads: “Secretary Feltman, I want to continue to explore the Iran aspect of it. If you could elaborate a little bit more as to how important Syria is to Iran... and how devastating it would be to them if, indeed, Syria were outside their sphere.” Feltman’s response: “Syria is, I would say, essential to the extremely negative role that Iran has been able to play in the region. Take Hezbollah. The transit routes for the arms to Hezbollah are via Syria. The facilitation that Iran gives to Hezbollah to undermine the state of Lebanon, to put Israel at risk, to basically destabilize the region comes via Syria.” Senator Rubio further asked: “Just in terms of the general policy goal of limiting and containing and defeating Iran’s ambitions, violent ambitions, for the region and the world, the loss of the Assad regime would be a devastating blow to Iran. Is that accurate?” Secretary Feltman ultimately responded: “Yes. I would—yes, yes...”
- 29 Mohammed, Arshad. “Clinton suggests Syrian rebels will get arms.” *Reuters*. February 23, 2012. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-conference-challenge-idUSTRE81M23R20120224>.
- 30 Lund, Aaron. Media Maskirovka: Russia and the Free Syrian Army. *Syria Comment*. November 8, 2015. <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/media-maskirovka-russia-and-the-free-syrian-army/>. Here it reads on the two operation rooms: “Thousands of rebel fighters have by now been vetted, trained, and approved for material support via two Military Operations Centers, which feed the insurgency from across the Turkish and Jordanian borders. The one in Turkey is colloquially known as the MOM, for Müsterek Operasyon Merkezi, while its Jordanian counterpart is called the MOC, after its English initials. Apart from Turkey and Jordan, these centers gather representatives of the United States, Saudi Arabia, France, and a bunch of other governments. Their role is to coordinate and supervise the flow of arms and ammunition to a select number of rebel groups. Foreign intelligence services, chief among them the CIA, collaborate through these centers to pick which groups should be eligible for support. They will not receive a stamp of approval until their members have been vetted for suspicious contacts, declared that they will stay away from alliances with al-Qaeda, and showed



some interest in a negotiated solution to the conflict. The groups involved enjoy different levels of trust and approval, but many also receive 'unofficial' support on the side from, for example, Turkey, Qatar, or Saudi Arabia, or various private funders. So far, this arrangement has been accepted by something like a hundred rebel factions all in all...

These groups are what the U.S. government typically refers to when it talks about 'the FSA' and there is indeed a very considerable overlap between MOM/MOC-backed factions and factions that self-designate as 'FSA.' This crude definition (MOM + MOC = FSA) is also increasingly used by the Syrian exile opposition, the rebels themselves, and others who follow this conflict." See also "Syria rebels get arms from abroad -opposition source." *Reuters*. February 24, 2012. <http://www.reuters.com/article/syria-opposition-arms-idAFL5E8DO4PO20120224>.

- 31 Chivers, C.J. and Eric Schmittmarch. "Arms Airlift to Syria Rebels Expands, With Aid From C.I.A." *The New York Times*. March 24, 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/25/world/middleeast/arms-airlift-to-syrian-rebels-expands-with-cia-aid.html>.
- 32 Ibid. "The former American official said David H. Petraeus, the C.I.A. director until November, had been instrumental in helping to get this aviation network moving and had prodded various countries to work together on it. Mr. Petraeus did not return multiple e-mails asking for comment."
- 33 Baker, Peter. "Heavy Pressure Led to Decision by Obama on Syrian Arms." *The New York Times*. June 14, 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/15/us/politics/pressure-led-to-obamas-decision-on-syrian-arms.html>. Here it further reads: "But the move also reflects nervousness in the White House about the increased involvement of Iran and its proxy group, Hezbollah, in the fight on Mr. Assad's behalf... The president wants to avoid sending 'heavier weapons systems,' Mr. Rhodes said, recognizing that they might fall into the hands of Al Nusra Front, an opposition group affiliated with Al Qaeda."
- 34 Interview with Ambassador Robert Ford, November 2016. I asked Ambassador Ford whether he believed that this was always clear to people fighting Assad who were receiving American help. He responded: "Of course it was. Absolutely. We never said to them you're going to win militarily. We never ever said that to them. I used to say to them, what, do you think you're going to have a victory parade down Share' (street) Baghdad in Damascus? I said it's not reasonable. I remember once Muath Khatib [leader of the Syrian opposition between November 2012 and March 2013] in early 2013 before Hezbollah intervened said Oh the next time we see you we might be in Damascus and I looked at him and said I don't think so. I said I think we need to see you in Geneva. They wanted to win a military victory that wasn't what the American, we didn't think it was possible. It's not possible today either."
- 35 Ibid. During the same interview Ambassador Robert Ford explained: "By waiting for a perfect solution, they lost the

opportunity to get good solutions. For example, if they had helped moderate rebel fighters in 2012 and early 2013 with money it would have been much easier to slow the recruitment into the ranks of al Qaida and later Tantheem al Dawla [ISIS]. But they waited. It's a matter of record now, they started second half of 2013 but by then, say August, September, October 2013, Nusra was already quite strong. By then they had Tantheem al Dawla, they were already taking over places in the east. And the groups in the east were already severely weakened....The American assistance was too little too late. That's because the White House waited. Remember when Obama said I don't think these farmers and doctors and dentists can fight very well? Well, that was his attitude. What's funny is the farmers, doctors and dentists have now been fighting Hezbollah and Quds force and Syrian government pretty hard for four years." When asked how Obama's statement differed from his own contention that it was always impossible for the rebels to achieve victory without direct military intervention from the United States, Ambassador Ford responded: "There's a difference between arming them in order to get them and the regime to go to a negotiating table and arming them in such a way that they can't in the end prevail enough on the battlefield to put pressure on the regime. What the American limited position did by basically sending in small amounts of weapons instead of larger amounts is they enabled extremist groups to occupy more space and they never put pressure on the regime to negotiate."


- 36 Hosenball, Mark. "Obama authorizes secret support for Syrian rebels." *Reuters*. August 1, 2012. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-syria-obama-order-idUSBRE8701OK20120802>. Here it reads: "President Barack Obama has signed a secret order authorizing U.S. support for rebels seeking to depose Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his government, sources familiar with the matter said. Obama's order, approved earlier this year and known as an intelligence 'finding,' broadly permits the CIA and other U.S. agencies to provide support that could help the rebels oust Assad... Precisely when Obama signed the secret intelligence authorization, an action not previously reported, could not be determined. The full extent of clandestine support that agencies like the CIA might be providing also is unclear." Further, Erica Borghard says of the different shades of covert action: "State-proxy alliances can be entirely covert, where neither party acknowledges the alliance's existence, or they can be 'open secrets,' where allies admit to the alliance but do not reveal the particular nature of alliance commitments. The alliance between the United States and the Syrian rebels falls into the category of 'open secrets.'" Borghard, Erica. "Arms and Influence in Syria. The Pitfalls of Greater U.S. Involvement." *Policy Analysis* No. 734. August 7, 2013. p. 13. https://object.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/pubs/pdf/pa734_web_1.pdf.
- 37 The hollowness of the phrase was on display at various

- “peace” conferences.
- 38 Gearan, Anne and Karen DeYoung. “U.S. announces expanded battlefield aid to Syrian rebels, but not arms.” *The Washington Post*. February 28, 2013. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/us-announces-expanded-battlefield-aid-to-syrian-rebels/2013/02/28/f0a32414-819b-11e2-b99e-6baf4ebe42df_story.html?utm_term=.370c59310f2b.
- 39 Most visibly by sending a new ambassador for the first time since 2005, but also working with a Congressional delegation that visited Damascus before the uprising. It remains a possibility that the Obama administration reverted to the Bush policy *before* the Syrian uprising, especially since the Congressional visit does not appear to have gone the way the US desired. But that would have to be established separately, through a closer look at what was going on in Washington during the period leading up to the uprising. Senator Ben Cardin, interviewed by Al-Monitor, said the following about the visit to Damascus: “The State Department worked with us on the visit. They were excited about us going.... The meeting with President Assad did not go well, did not go well at all. He was very firm in his prerogatives to have good relations with everyone including terrorist organisations, his independence, and did not seem interested at all in Israel. Some of our members were pretty direct with him. It was not, I would say, a productive visit with the president.” Pecquet, Julian. “TIMELINE: Key players reflect on US policy in Syria.” *Al-Monitor*. March 1, 2016. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/tr/contents/articles/originals/2016/03/syria-war-us-officials-five-years-failure.html>.
- 40 Although Obama’s 2010 National Security Strategy maintained roughly the same description of America’s problems with Iran, it also said it would pursue “engagement” with Tehran. The White House. *National Security Strategy*. May 2010. <http://nssarchive.us/NSSR/2010.pdf>.
- 41 America’s policy on Assad would be largely shaped by the arm-wrestling between Obama, who was reluctant to commit to *costly* military operations, and part of the foreign policy establishment that wanted to strike hard at Iran’s regional reach. But the legacy of Bush’s invasion and occupation of Iraq would weigh heavily in many ways, two of which bear mention here: It made intervention, especially the visible, costly kind, so unpopular that even hyper-interventionists were unable to press for it. Secondly, for the same reason it presented Obama with an opportunity to maneuver himself out of a trap partly of his own making in 2013, by choosing to refer the decision on a military strike to Congress, likely in the belief that it would not authorize it, or at least that it would take the blame for whatever might have happened next.
- 42 Friedman, Thomas. “Obama on the World.” *The New York Times*. August 8, 2014. https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/09/opinion/president-obama-thomas-l-friedman-iraq-and-world-affairs.html?_r=0. In this interview with President Obama it reads: “With ‘respect to Syria,’ said the president, the notion that arming the rebels would have made a difference has “always been a fantasy. This idea that we could provide some light arms or even more sophisticated arms to what was essentially an opposition made up of former doctors, farmers, pharmacists and so forth, and that they were going to be able to battle not only a well-armed state but also a well-armed state backed by Russia, backed by Iran, a battle-hardened Hezbollah, that was never in the cards.” Similarly, Goldberg writes: “When you have a professional army,’ he once told me, ‘that is well armed and sponsored by two large states’—Iran and Russia—who have huge stakes in this, and they are fighting against a farmer, a carpenter, an engineer who started out as protesters and suddenly now see themselves in the midst of a civil conflict ...’ He paused. ‘The notion that we could have—in a clean way that didn’t commit U.S. military forces—changed the equation on the ground there was never true.’” Goldberg, Jeffrey. “The Obama Doctrine.”
- 43 Danto elaborates on the idea of transcending intentions in historic narration in several different ways. Imagine the past, he writes, as a great container “in which are located, in the order of their occurrence, all the events which have ever happened.” “It is a container which grows moment by moment longer in the forward direction, and moment by moment fuller as layer upon layer of events enter its fluid, accommodating maw... once within the container, a given event *E* and the growing edge of the Past recede away from one another at a rate which is just the rate at which Time flows.” Danto, Arthur. *Narration and Knowledge*. p. 146. Danto then inserts into his picture an “Ideal Chronicler,” who “knows whatever happens the moment it happens, even in other minds,” and can also transcribe everything that happens “as it happens, the way it happens.” Ibid. p. 149. All of this would not be enough to capture the truth about the event. It’s not that the description we would have is not complete, but it is only complete “in the way in which a witness might describe it,” even one “capable of seeing all at once everything that happens, as it happens, the way it happens. *But that is not enough*. For there is a class of descriptions of any event under which the event cannot be witnessed.” Ibid. p. 151. Further, in a footnote Danto credits G.E.M Anscombe with the idea that “there are many descriptions of an action, only under some of which is an action intentional.” Ibid. p. 413. Danto also draws examples from arts and sciences: “...it was not an *intention* of Aristarchus to anticipate Copernicus, nor of Petrarch to open the renaissance. To give such descriptions requires concepts which were only available at a later time. From this it follows that even having access to the minds of the men whose action he describes will not enable the Ideal Chronicler to appreciate the significance of those actions. To be alive to the historical significance of events as they happen, one has to know to which later events these will be related, in narrative sentences, by historians of the future.



- It will then not be enough simply to be able to predict future events. It will be necessary to know *which* future events are relevant, and this requires predicting the *interests* of future historians.” Ibid. p. 169.
- 44 Ibid. p. 183.
- 45 It is important to note that Danto does not discard intentions altogether: “...frequently and almost typically, the actions of men are not intentional under those descriptions given of them by means of narrative sentences. This does not, of course, entail that reference to human purposes are historically unimportant.” Ibid. p. 182.
- 46 Such fault-lines have festered in the shadows of authoritarian states that closely police public debate, and surfaced where these states lost authority. But it is not all about ideology; fighters often draw inspiration from religion regardless of ideology, and there are complex and interwoven reasons for rebels to choose factions and to move from one to another. More importantly, the Syrian rebels were under immediate pressure to unite, or at least co-ordinate in battle.
- 47 The Center for a New American Security uses the phrase in a piece about “the limits of proxy warfare.” “While ‘peeling the onion’ of jihadist sympathizers and cobelligerents away is important, it is a means to the end of more effectively targeting and dismantling hardcore Islamists and jihadist groups. Without that, the policy provides an anvil but no hammer. Trying to shorten the Syrian civil war is a noble intention, but doing so while pushing out jihadists invites and likely even requires prolonging its second phase. Scaling up our efforts will not solve the practical or moral dilemmas with proxy warfare.” Center for a New American Security. “The Limits of Proxy Warfare in Syria.” March 26, 2013. <https://www.cnas.org/publications/blog/the-limits-of-proxy-warfare-in-syria>.
- 48 Ibid. The infighting, said CNAC, should not be hard to predict: “It is not surprising Syrian infighting is occurring, as there have been signs of it brewing for months. More confusing would be trying to marginalize large swathes of rebel forces while simultaneously stepping up arms provisions, and expecting unity, rather than heightened infighting, to be the result. ‘Marginalization’ of dedicated insurgents in an ongoing civil war involves violence.”
- 49 Londoño and Miller note: “Ward’s team — working primarily out of hotel lobbies — has spent the past few months studying the demographics and dynamics of communities where extremists are making inroads. Targeted U.S. aid, he said, can be used to empower emerging local leaders who are moderate and to jump-start basic services while dimming the appeal of extremists.” Londoño, Ernesto and Greg Miller. “CIA begins weapons delivery to Syrian rebels.” *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/cia-begins-weapons-delivery-to-syrian-rebels/2013/09/11/9fcf2ed8-1b0c-11e3-a628-7e6dde8f889d_story.html?utm_term=.dccc58e29c23.
- 50 Over time, the opposition would develop a rhetoric that combined grateful praise with bitter criticism of U.S. policy, and constant pleas for more help. Time and again, their hopes would fade, and new hope would arise. Meanwhile at the second Geneva conference, Anas al Abdeh, a senior member of the opposition delegation who is currently its leader would say that the FSA will “break al-Nusra’s head.” Al Omar, Mousa. “Breaking: Anas al Abdeh explains what he said about breaking al-Nusra’s head.” February 18, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1BcSAWTPvA>.
- 51 De Young, Karen. Kerry says U.S. will expedite new aid to Syrian opposition. *The Washington Post*. April 21, 2013. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/kerry-says-us-will-expedite-new-aid-to-syrian-opposition/2013/04/21/91461f40-aa8f-11e2-a8b9-2a63d75b5459_story.html?utm_term=.702cca059a72.
- 52 “‘Our revolution is for the entire Syrian people,’ opposition leader Moaz al-Khatib told reporters, standing alongside Kerry and Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu. ‘We will guarantee that weapons will be used in accordance with the specific purpose that they were supplied for, and that these weapons will not fall in the wrong hands. These weapons and military equipment will be returned to the relevant and appropriate institutions upon the conclusion of the revolution.’” Associated Press. “US doubles aid to Syrian rebels, who want more.” *The Journal.ie*. April 21, 2013. <http://www.thejournal.ie/us-doubles-syrian-rebels-aid-878583-Apr2013/?amp=1>.
- 53 The most concise rebuttal of that idea was offered by Tim Kaine, a Democratic senator from Virginia: “We threatened military action and they responded. That’s deterrent credibility.” Goldberg, Jeffrey. “The Obama Doctrine.”
- 54 Syrian FM Waleed al Moallem said in August 2014: “Relating to airstrikes on Syrian territory, I said we are ready to coordinate and cooperate because we are the sons of the land and we know how to identify useful strikes. Those who wish to launch aggression on Syria have no justification except in coordination with us, if they want to fight terrorism. Anything else is aggression.” Syrian4allNews. “Waleed al Moallem: Those who wish to launch aggression in Syria has to coordinate with us.” August 26, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QQhmaKfsi1A>.
- 55 “Mustapha Sejari, one of the rebels who says he’s approved for the U.S. training program, told *The Daily Beast* that he and his 1,000 men are on the verge of withdrawing their candidacies. The issue: the American government’s demand that the rebels can’t use any of their newfound battlefield prowess or U.S.-provided weaponry against the army of Bashar al-Assad or any of its manifold proxies and allies, which include Iranian-built militias such as Lebanese Hezbollah. They must only fight ISIS, Washington insists.” Weiss, Michael. Exclusive: Syrian Rebels Backing Out of U.S. Fight Vs. ISIS. *The Daily Beast*. May 31,

2015. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/05/31/key-rebels-ready-to-quit-u-s-fight-vs-isis.html>.
- 56 In an address on 13 December 2016 by U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Samantha Power said: "Is there literally nothing that can shame you," she asked the Assad regime Russia and Iran. "Are you incapable of shame?" "Samantha Power criticizes Syria, Iran and Russia over Aleppo – video." *The Guardian*. December 13, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2016/dec/14/are-you-incapable-of-shame-samantha-power-criticises-syria-iran-and-russia-video>.
- 57 Pillar writes that one advantage of offshore balancing is "to conserve one's own blood and treasure while someone else expends his, by utilizing the fears and interests of some other state to check the ambitions and advances of yet another state (or group)." Pillar, Paul. "The Forgotten Benefits of Offshore Balancing." *The National Interest*. January 26, 2016. <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/pillar/the-forgotten-benefits-offshore-balancing-15035?page=2>.
- 58 Ibid.
- 59 In an interview with Thomas Friedman in July 2015, Obama said: "Nobody has an interest in seeing [the Islamic State] control huge swaths of territory between Damascus and Baghdad. That's not good for Iran. It makes it very difficult for them to sustain a buffer, which has always been a significant motivator for them since the Iraq-Iran War. It's not good for the Saudis. It leaves them vulnerable in all sorts of ways, and the truth of the matter is that, most importantly, it's not good for the people there." Friedman, Thomas L. "Obama Makes His Case on Iran Nuclear Deal." *The New York Times*. July 14, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/15/opinion/thomas-friedman-obama-makes-his-case-on-iran-nuclear-deal.html>.
- 60 In a December 2016 speech, Obama said: "The bottom line is we are breaking the back of ISIL. We're taking away its safe havens. And we've accomplished all this at a cost of \$10 billion over two years, which is the same amount that we used to spend in one month at the height of the Iraq War." President Barack Obama. Remarks by the President on the Administration's Approach to Counterterrorism. At MacDill Air Force Base, Tampa, FL. December 6, 2016. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/12/06/remarks-president-administrations-approach-counterterrorism>.
- 61 Pillar, Paul. "The Forgotten Benefits of Offshore Balancing."
- 62 Henry Kissinger writes: "The implication of Wilsonianism has been that America resisted, above all, the method of change, and that it had no strategic interests worth defending if they were threatened by apparently legal methods. As late as the Gulf War, President Bush insisted that he was not so much defending vital oil supplies as resisting the principle of aggression." Kissinger, Henry. *Diplomacy*. p. 53.
- 63 Ibid. p. 50.
- 64 Ibid. p. 72.
- 65 Mead, Walter Russell. *Special providence: American foreign policy and how it changed the world*. 2001. p. 36.
- 66 Ibid. p. 37.
- 67 Kissinger, Henry. *Diplomacy*. p. 73.
- 68 There were virulently sectarian groups like Jaish-al-Islam to which the Americans did not seem to display hostility and which were supported by America's allies.
- 69 Danto, Arthur. *Narration and Knowledge*. p. 151.
- 70 It remains a mystery how the United States thought Hezbollah and Iran would react to Assad's troubles. Jeffrey Feltman, citing reports from the US embassy in Damascus, said the demonstrations had an "anti-Hezbollah, anti-Iran flavor" to them (see note 27 above). But in our interview, Ford said he and "many others" within the administration did not expect Hezbollah and the Iranians would go in. To my question "At what point did it look to you like the regime was about to collapse or that the uprising had a realistic chance," Ford responded: "I never thought the regime was about to collapse, and I never thought the uprising was ever going to overthrow Assad any time soon. I did think by early 2013 that Assad was losing the war of attrition, and that unless there was a change within a couple of years, the opposition would compel him to negotiate. What we didn't expect and the mistake we made analytically, me and many others, is we didn't expect Hezbollah and Iran to send in ground fighters. That we never expected." Asked to explain why not, he further said: "Yeah it's a fair question and I have to say, the reason is that Hezbollah sacrificed its reputation among large segments of the Sunni Arab community from Morocco to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf by intervening so directly on behalf of Assad. All of the credibility gains that it made in 2005 and 6 in the war with Israel in Lebanon, I think it sacrificed in order to prop up Assad. So it paid a long-term price for a short term, well, now medium-term decision." As for Obama, his words to the New York Times and The Atlantic seem to suggest that he was aware from the start that Iran, Hezbollah and Russia had "huge stakes" in the war. Friedman, Thomas. "Obama on the World." Goldberg, Jeffrey. "The Obama Doctrine."
- 71 Erica Borghard writes that the "asymmetry of interests between the United States and backers of the Assad regime means that the latter are willing to apply significantly greater resources to prop up Assad than the former to support the rebels." Borghard, Erica. "Arms and Influence in Syria. The Pitfalls of Greater U.S. Involvement."
- 72 Within the context of discussing the imaginary "Ideal Chronicle" (discussed in Note 43), Danto says: "Common use of the term 'event' is fairly chaotic, and we are likely to apply it to occurrences of varying duration, even null duration. ... We speak of the French revolution or the civil war as major events in the history of France and America respectively, and these are better measured by the calendar than the clock, provided we agree where in time to begin. ... Well, then, the Past must contain fragments of events as

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- well as events. With this lame addendum, we may continue to employ the model, for what it is worth.” Danto, Arthur. *Narration and Knowledge*. p. 147.
- 73 Walsh, Kenneth T. “Obama’s Secret Dinner With Presidential Historians.” *U.S. News*. July 15, 2009. <http://www.usnews.com/news/obama/articles/2009/07/15/obamas-secret-dinner-with-presidential-historians>.
- Kessler, Glenn. “Did Obama say he ranked in the top four presidents?” *Washington Post*. March 1, 2012. https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/did-obama-say-he-ranked-in-the-top-four-presidents/2012/02/29/gIQA3ac3iR_blog.html?utm_term=.a9490ac105dc.
- 74 Kissinger, Henry. *Diplomacy*. p. 53.
- 75 Ibid. p. 767.
- 76 Tahrir al-Sham. “The first speech of Hashem al-Sheikh, General Commander of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.” February 9, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KAPfjaNvTJ0&sns=em>.



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