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OBAMA AND TRUMP IN SYRIA

Similarities and Differences in Their Foreign Policies

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Since the outbreak of the war in Syria, it has become clear that first under President Obama and later under Trump, the United States (U.S.) struggled to develop a coherent strategy that primarily balances US interests with the resources (financial, military, diplomatic, political) at its disposal. US policymakers have been faced with a series of difficult choices that will affect not only Syria, but also geopolitics and US policy in the Middle East for years to come.

This paper examines the similarities and differences between former presidents Obama and Trump and their foreign policies towards the Syrian war, which started in 2011. It contributes to a better understanding of third-party interventions in wars, and of US interventions in a post-Iraq/Afghanistan era. A change of government inevitably leads to changes in the design and implementation of foreign policy. Therefore, the transition from the Obama to the Trump administration had consequences for the way US foreign policy was made. The calm and relaxed outlook of Barack Obama was replaced by the bad-tempered perception of Donald Trump, who seemed to impose a more rigorous foreign

policy perspective, with the aim of turning the United States into a more isolationist country but viewing China and Iran as the main ‘threats’. Obama was anything but an appeaser, but managed to pursue a proactive foreign policy, even entering a working relationship with a ‘rogue’ state such as Iran. Trump, on the other hand, tried to strengthen Washington’s foreign policy by reasserting sovereignty and competing with China and Iran rather than focusing on dialogue (he did however talk with North Korea’s Kim Jong-un). One might conclude that both presidents differed in their foreign policy approaches, but did they really? This paper seeks the answer to that question in the context of the Syrian war. This war will be used as a case study so that the presidents and their foreign policies can be compared in terms of similarities and differences. The ultimate goal is to analyse the foreign policies of both governments with regard to the Syrian war and to answer the central research question: “How can similarities and differences in the policies of Obama and Trump with regard to the Syrian war be explained?”

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To be able to provide a substantiated answer to this research question, this paper uses the methodology of a comparative case study research. The research will be carried out by means of a thorough literature study with additional document analysis in which both primary sources and secondary literature will be reviewed with the aim of providing an answer to the research question. Some examples of primary sources that will be consulted are government documents, speeches, press conferences of the presidents, and news media. In addition, this paper will be guided by the theoretical framework of neoclassical realism. This theoretical framework will be complemented in an integrated way by theory concerning the concepts of proxy wars, presidential doctrines, and the rhetoric of red lines.

Subsequently, some specific conflict lines in Syria will be studied to answer the central research question. For each conflict line a comparison will be made between Obama and Trump and their reaction to particular situations or events. Congress, the international community, and public opinion will also be discussed for each conflict line if relevant developments took place at the level of these actors. The research will be followed by the testing of the theoretical framework and a general conclusion that will refer to the central research question.

(Dis)Continuity?

What is central to this paper is a comparison in Trump's and Obama's foreign policy towards Syria. In what areas do we see continuity and in what ways do the presidents differ in their policy choices? The most common way to assess continuity versus change in US foreign policy is to focus on the specific policy choices presidents make. On the one hand, presidents can choose to change policy to pursue different goals. On the other, policies can be changed to use other means. In addition, each president devotes time and attention to different issues or regions. For example, we see that Obama wanted to bring about a *Pivot to Asia* and Trump rather prioritized the homeland with his *America First* platform.

However, identifying policy change is a difficult task.¹ It can "evolve over time, not through presidential intervention but through bureaucratic drift or changing circumstances."² Presidents can also change policies in subtle ways that are difficult to detect. They may pursue the same objectives but be willing to incur greater costs or run greater risks to achieve them.

There are several reasons why one might expect **discontinuity** in US foreign policy from one administration to another.³

First, all US presidents have different backgrounds and logically also have different ideological visions of the world, which may lead them to pursue different policies. A growing literature on leaders in international politics highlights how a person's age, gender, career background and experiences can shape his or her approach to foreign affairs.⁴ As Saunders highlights, presidents' attitudes towards international affairs are often formed before they take office and usually do not change once they are in office. The US constitutional system, in which the president traditionally has considerable autonomy in foreign affairs, reinforces the importance of these factors at the individual level. The more one president's personal background and beliefs differ from those of another, the greater the degree of policy change we expect.

Second, according to MacDonald, changes in staffing and turnover of bureaucracies can also lead to policy changes. When members of the cabinet and other top officials take up their posts, they bring with them new priorities and ideas, which they try to translate into practical policy changes. Even when there is continuity in basic objectives, new senior officials may bring new ways of 'doing business.'

Third, MacDonald's work highlights that there may be domestic political incentives for presidents to make policy reversals. When the White House transitions into new ownership, the new president can use policy changes to differentiate himself from his predecessor and to deliver on campaign promises. "For most new

presidents,” Clinton and Lang stated in 1993, “the goal that gets priority is ... a flying start.” When President George W. Bush took office, his administration adopted an “anything but Clinton” approach to foreign affairs, “rejecting foreign policy positions simply because the previous administration had taken them.”⁵

At the same time, there are many factors that also push foreign policy in the direction of increased **continuity**.

Firstly, policies can receive consistent support from different governments because they promote a clear national interest. The idea that the United States should ensure a free flow of oil from the Middle East, for example, has had the support of both Democrats and Republicans since World War II.⁶ Presidential candidates may make general criticisms of US foreign policy during their campaign, but once in office, they tend to accept the continuing interests of the US in certain areas and submit to their more experienced officials. In cases where there is a broad consensus among foreign policy elites, considerable policy stability can be expected from one administration to the next.

Secondly, because international politics is a complex and unpredictable field, there is a possibility that presidents may be reluctant to deviate drastically from their predecessors. Presidents may be dissatisfied with the status quo, but this may not make them inclined to change policy too quickly or too decisively. They may lack a clear understanding of the interests at stake for the US. They may lack a clear idea of what policy alternatives are available. As Lindsay notes, “changing strategies, revising priorities and renewing missions is politically painful and potentially dangerous.”⁷ In complex situations where change requires the consent of others, we would expect presidents to be more reluctant to spend political capital on drastic policy changes.

Thirdly, bureaucratic organisations can resist a president’s attempt to chart a new course. Foreign policy bureaucracies have standard operating procedures and deep-rooted organisational cultures that persist across

governments. As a president, it is therefore difficult to simply break through that for the sake of one’s own policy perceptions.

As already stated, a comparison between Obama’s and Trump’s foreign policy towards Syria will be central. In what way can similarities and/or differences between these two presidents, a Democrat and a Republican, be explained? One could hypothesise that the foreign policy of both presidents greatly differs, both in general and regarding Syria. In addition, it will become clear that other factors besides political preference play a role in policy making. Donald Trump is quite a special president in terms of background and temperament. He is such an extraordinary personality, so seemingly immune to the usual pressures and incentives, that it is tempting to assume that foreign policy under him will simply be the projection of his will. But “like presidents before him, Trump will learn that going solo is not the recipe for an effective and sustainable foreign policy. Domestic foreign policy, always fraught and frustrating, has become even more difficult for presidents to manage in recent years. Trump will be no exception.”⁸

Conflict lines in Syria

To be able to provide a solid answer to the central research question formulated in the introduction, this research highlights several fault-lines or conflict lines that were and are important in the Syrian war. To each of them, the US, with its interests and policies, relates in a certain way. Both presidents are placed next to each other, and are empirically compared on the same conflict lines, which gave the opportunity to discern continuity or discontinuity. In addition, each conflict line follows a certain pattern: the presidents are treated chronologically, leaving room for the role of Congress, the international community and (American) public opinion. Depending on their relevance, the latter are not always mentioned, or at best only briefly.

Assad vs. rebels

11 years ago, thousands of Syrians crowded the streets when the Arab Spring took hold in the country. The regime of Bashar al-Assad responded with repression and violence, causing various oppositional groups to unite and take up arms themselves. After this rapid escalation of violence and because of the scale of the protests and the support received by various rebel groups, such as the umbrella organization, the Free Syrian Army, the Assad regime initially lost a lot of ground. But as the war proceeded, the Syrian regime increasingly had to deal with a divided and fragmented internal adversary. The rebels are ethnically but also ideologically divided. Moreover, the rebels are not only fighting against Assad, but also against each other and extremist terrorist groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) that had emerged from this chaos.

There is ample evidence that the United States wanted to oust Assad from power. Both Obama and later Trump took a stand against the Syrian government and called on Assad to step down. But during the Syrian conflict little concrete action was taken to achieve this goal.⁹ Both Obama and Trump lacked sound policy plans for the removal of Assad. Still, this conflict line was initially the most important for the US. Later on, the emergence of ISIS and the chemical weapons issue became more important, as will be seen in later paragraphs.

The issue of whether to provide (lethal or non-lethal) support to the Syrian opposition groups was a focus of debate in Washington for a long time, especially during Obama's tenure. In early 2012, Obama found himself in a contradictory situation, which he had largely created himself: on the one hand, he had called on Assad to step down. It was perhaps partly through wishful thinking and partly through inaccurate intelligence that the US government thought Assad's departure was imminent.¹⁰ On the other hand, the government showed little sign of a strategy to facilitate this, leading to a phase of ambiguity. This was wrongly interpreted by the US's regional allies as the build-up to further US

intervention. Nevertheless, in terms of arming the rebels, there were some striking choices.¹¹ On the one hand, we saw Obama rejecting the Clinton-Petraeus plan in 2012, which was supported by many policymakers in Washington. On the other hand, Obama then chose to secretly endorse a plan by the CIA to assist the rebels in their fight against Assad. This plan was adopted back in 2012, at the beginning of the crisis.¹²

Fundamentally, the US government struggled with three issues. First, the reluctance of the US public to engage in a new direct or indirect intervention in the absence of a clear national security interest.¹³ Second, which rebels were able to defeat a government that was armed by Russia, and how could they be supported? From 2015 on, the Russian army itself entered the theatre in a massive way, further reducing the chances of the rebels. Three, the White House was concerned about some battle groups' alignment with jihadism.¹⁴

It is also notable that with the advent of IS from 2014 onwards, the issue of providing support to the opposition groups got reframed. Groups supported by the US had to join the fight against ISIS. This can be explained by the American tradition of fighting terror and the perennial War on Terror that is also going on in Syria. Yet, by 2015 Obama's support program proved to be a failure. Trump chose to halt the program.

From a theoretical point of view, this first phase shows a clear interaction between the individual, domestic and international levels. At the *personal* level, the cautious Obama oscillated between the principled cause to support rebels against Assad's massive repression of dissent on the one hand, and on the other the realization that neither the public nor Congress were ready for deep engagement. With this caution, Obama opposed his Secretary of State Hilary Clinton (2009-2013), who was in favour of stronger commitment. The longstanding tradition of liberal interventionism as well as its growing contestation in society and politics are determining elements at the *domestic* political level. Moreover, the Obama administration worried about the military

suitability and ideological alignment of the rebels, and Russia's increasing military support to the Assad regime. These were key *international* factors to consider. Given the larger domestic support base to fight terror, the emergence of ISIS sparked more willingness in Washington to intervene – at the same time completely pushing aside the removal of Assad as a priority. The much more isolationist Trump was consistently not interested in regime change in Syria motivated by democracy and human rights concerns. He actually accepted how Russia and the Assad regime had regained control over most of Syria's territory since 2015.

Chemical weapons: the red line

Since the beginning of the Syrian conflict, the US had been very concerned about Syrian chemical weapons and their possible use against opposition groups and civilians. In 2012, Obama warned the Syrian government and other parties in the conflict that the use of chemical weapons would change the calculus of the US approach in Syria. Thus, the use of chemical weapons in the ongoing war would cross a "red line" that would be met with "enormous consequences." However, exactly what those consequences were was not clearly defined. It is interesting to note that this statement was made before the effective allegations of the use of chemical weapons in Syria began.¹⁵ Then, a year after Obama's statements, evidence surfaced that Assad had used chemical weapons against his own people.¹⁶

At a meeting of Obama's national security team on 24 August 2013, the president appeared to have decided on a limited military strike against the Assad regime to punish it for the chemical weapons attacks of 21 August.¹⁷ Later, on 30 August, then Secretary of State John Kerry publicly called Assad "a criminal and a murderer", leaving little doubt that US military action was being readied.¹⁸ Obama then consulted Congress but was met with serious backlash regarding the idea of a strike. However, in less than 24 hours, President Obama appeared to change his position when he entered the Rose Garden on 31 August

to address the American people in response to suspected chemical attacks in Syria. Many were surprised by his words that day. The announcement of the policy decision itself – that President Obama had decided that the United States should take military action to punish the Syrian regime for using chemical weapons – was expected¹⁹. But to the surprise of many, President Obama did not implement his earlier threat of military action.²⁰ Instead, he praised himself with "bringing about an agreement without an attack to get rid of those chemical weapons... a result that would not have been possible with air strikes."²¹ A final vote in Congress never took place, as Russia showed up with an alternative option and through an agreement the chemical weapons stockpile would be removed under the auspices of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.²²

A few more reports of the use of chemical weapons appeared during President Obama's tenure. Obama's established red line was crossed with the use of these weapons. How did Trump respond to the new violation of the old red line?

In any case, President Donald J. Trump's policy on the use of chemical weapons was not consistent. Before becoming a presidential candidate, Trump did not support any intervention in Syria based on the use of chemical weapons. He even called Obama's decision to draw the red line a humiliation for the US. Trump did not support Obama's decision in 2013 to intervene in Syria after the chemical weapons attack in Ghouta that killed about 1,500 people. Trump opposed the idea of intervening via Twitter: *President Obama do not attack Syria. There is no upside and a tremendous downside, save your "powder" for another (and more important) day.* Trump's anti-intervention stance came to an end in 2017, during his own tenure, after the chemical weapons attack in Khan Shaykhun. He blamed the attack on the previous administration not taking more aggressive action against the Assad regime, claiming that he would have announced military intervention with a "big league response."²³

Many observers felt that, as a presidential candidate and president, Trump had no interest in military intervention in Syria or a global initiative against the use of chemical weapons. He even argued that a US intervention in Syria could turn the conflict in Syria into World War III.²⁴ In 2016, Trump was still seen by Assad as a potential ally “in the fight against terrorism” in the Middle East.²⁵ But Trump’s attitude towards Syria and Assad was said to have “changed very much” as a result of new chemical attacks in 2017.²⁶ Trump was moved by the videos and images of dying children and women and he claimed to be outraged by the way the regime was killing its people.²⁷

During a press conference in April 2017, Trump claimed that the chemical attacks on civilians crossed many lines for him. However, he refused to mention the term “red line” and shifted responsibility pretty much entirely to the previous administration, arguing that the crisis in Syria could have ended years ago. He said Obama made a “blank threat” at the time when he called the use of chemical weapons a red line that Syria could not cross without consequences.²⁸ However, when Barack Obama himself was still president, Trump publicly urged him not to take military action in Syria.²⁹ A few days after the press conference, on 7 April 2017, President Trump ordered a US intervention in response to the chemical attacks in Khan Shaykhun a few days earlier.³⁰ The US attack took place at 3:40 am local time, targeting specific parts of the Syrian al-Shayrat airbase, where intelligence agencies believed the sarin 39 attacks came from.³¹

It is interesting to see how both presidents during their term of office made a complete U-turn in their position on Assad and his use of chemical weapons. First, we have Obama, where after the Ghouta attack on 21 August 2013, the hard red line threat was ultimately never enacted with the military consequences that were initially attached to it. Then we have Trump, who during Obama’s tenure clearly disagreed with the idea of military action in Syria after the red line was crossed. Trump’s anti-interventionist stance came to an end during his own presidency, and he ended up

being the president who launched the first US airstrikes against the Syrian government. In addition, it is also noteworthy that Trump called on Obama to involve Congress in his decision on whether to respond to the chemical weapons, while Trump himself never consulted Congress in his decision to launch counterattacks in 2017 and 2018. Moreover, there was also a significant shift in public opinion and its support for military action to punish Assad for the use of chemical weapons. How can we approach this interesting turnaround? Each president took a different approach to the decision-making processes, which significantly influenced the US response to Syria’s use of chemical weapons.

The red line episode can also be explained through several components of neoclassical realism. Here again we see *personal* differences between Obama and Trump. The cautious Obama had doubts about the effectiveness of a strike, consulted Congress, felt resistance, and shied away from military action even more. The more impulsive and less predictable Trump, loyal to his isolationist stance, first opposed Obama’s initial idea to strike, but then – confronted with a chemical attack in Syria himself – emotionally recurred to the first American strike on Syrian forces. Given widespread *domestic* reluctance about large and dangerous US military engagement abroad, a strike, if any, could only be punctual, even symbolic. At the *international* level, presidential policymaking was constrained by Syrian and Russian military might, and the risk for a wider escalation in case of a larger US operation.

The red line in Syria shows that red lines throughout history cannot always be interpreted in the same way. Moreover, to be effective, it is important that red line diplomacy does not become a hollow concept when rhetoric does not match actions. Red lines are indeed a strong policy instrument when they are stated and promoted in the right way.³² However, this red line caused the US with president Obama to suffer reputation damage as the threatening rhetoric did not match the preparedness to act.

Islamic State

In the last two years of Obama's term, US policy shifted from supporting rebels against Assad to a more focused counterterrorism strategy to destroy ISIS, which seized control of large parts of Iraq and Syria in 2014. In the beginning of his term Trump continued to pursue this goal. The international efforts to defeat the group were largely successful.³³

ISIS's armed offensive in Iraq and Syria in 2014 prompted a US response. When US journalist James Foley was beheaded in August and a video of this was leaked to the media, the US launched a more comprehensive strategy. In early September, US authorities announced the creation of a broad, international coalition to fight ISIS.³⁴ Suddenly, the US policy lines were clearly delineated and communicated in an official manner, something that was previously unseen in Washington's Syria strategy.

Factors on the ground gave rise to a more forceful approach to ISIS than had been pursued earlier in Obama's presidency. The fight against Assad did not seem to succeed, while the ISIS phenomenon could not be ignored either due to local atrocities and terrorist attacks outside Syria and Iraq. The administration was, as it were, overtaken by the reality and complexity of the war on terror. President Obama, deploying the US air force, for the rest retained the strategy of assisting local forces and limiting the number of US troops, but the operations against ISIS continued to be a costly undertaking. Obama's approach succeeded in thwarting progress of, and largely isolating, ISIS operations, "but the asymmetric tactics the group enacted in response created a whole new set of problems."³⁵

During the election campaign, candidate Trump insisted that his presidency would lead to a fundamental change in Washington's approach to counterterrorism. Despite Trump's idiosyncratic style, he did not deviate from the counterterrorism 'playbook' inherited from his predecessor.³⁶ Biegon & Watts write that this applied not only to the objectives of US counterterrorism efforts, but also to the

prominence of counterterrorism practices within the broader objectives of the US state system.³⁷ Of course, the transition from Obama to Trump brought with it some changes in the tactical details of US counterterrorism policy. These generally kept pace with Trump's more bellicose discourse. For example, Trump's administration expanded the use of armed drones and increased the deployment of special operation forces. But the lack of a fundamental shift in US counterterrorism policy suggests that Trump's ability to radically reorient US policy was limited. This would be partly due to the "structural imperatives associated with US imperialism, which not only prevent presidents from revising US policy in line with their own agendas, but also provoke interventionist policies in the Global South that seek to stabilise existing patterns of political-economic relations. These structural factors, reflected in changing executive-level strategies (in Trump's case around his *America First* agenda), continue to influence US foreign policy in profound ways."³⁸

Seen through the classical realist lens, it can be concluded that fighting a large-scale international terrorist phenomenon like ISIS is deeply rooted in a long-standing *national* tradition, reinforced by the 9/11 attacks in 2001, with bipartisan support. In other words, the war on terror has become part of US strategic culture. Even though Damascus and Moscow opposed the US-led coalition's intervention on legal grounds, the former welcomed the shift in Western focus away from Assad. The coalition made sure not to enter in conflict with Syrian and Russian forces, respecting the constraints posed by the *international system*.

The Kurdish issue

The start of the war in 2011 pitted Assad against many internal non-state actors and external foreign powers committed to overthrowing his regime. In the early stages of the war, government forces lost large tracts of land and effectively withdrew all troops from north-eastern Syria to focus on a strong rebel presence in other parts of the country.³⁹ In 2014, with the

government virtually absent from Kurdish-dominated northern Syria, the newly formed Kurdish Democratic Union Party of Syria (PYD) gained ground. The PYD declared autonomy with the establishment of the Democratic Autonomous Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria, commonly referred to as Rojava.⁴⁰ The PYD and its paramilitary wing known as the People's Protection Units (YPG) remained neutral in the war between Assad and the coalition of Syrian rebels. Assad was tolerant concerning the Kurdish experiment in north-eastern Syria if it did not mean strengthening the growing ranks of the Syrian rebel groups.⁴¹ The Kurds of Syria increased their international prominence with their efforts in fighting the rise of ISIS and were even able to connect with key players such as the United States, Russia, and even the Syrian government, all of whom considered ISIS to be the bigger enemy.⁴² Although the PYD/YPG received much support from the international community, they faced a constant threat from the north from Turkey, which insists that it will never accept a PYD-controlled autonomous region in Syria.⁴³

Only after ISIS invaded Iraq in mid-2014, carried out a genocide of the Yazidi community and beheaded foreign hostages, did Washington decide to intervene directly in the war in Syria from September 2014 by launching airstrikes and supporting the YPG on the ground. In the wake of these efforts, the US kept a military presence in North-East Syria until this day. The United States abandoned the plan to rely on Arab rebels to tackle ISIS – in part because of the rebels' refusal to commit to fighting ISIS alone while ignoring the Assad regime, responsible for most civilian casualties and destruction in Syria. Tactical assistance to the YPG later shifted to a partnership, with the Americans deploying special forces in areas under the group's control. The US encouraged the YPG to include non-Kurdish fighters in their ranks – leading to the creation of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

Given the already mentioned *domestic* opposition to large-scale US involvement in a foreign war, both Obama and Trump relied on the

Kurdish YPG and its extension SDF as ground forces to combat ISIS. However, by arming the YPG, they entered into a political conflict with the Turkish government, who opposes this policy given the ties between the YPG and the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), which wages a war with the Turkish state since 1984.⁴⁴ Yet, this factor did apparently not pose a major *international* constraint to the two US administrations. The tactical advantages of working through the YPG outweighed the disadvantage of Turkey's anger, even though the latter is a NATO ally. In addition, when Trump partly withdrew US troops from North-Eastern Syria late 2019 as he – prematurely, according to critics – deemed the fight against ISIS fought, Turkey's President Erdogan immediately decided to invade part of that border area to expel the YPG.

Iran

After the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Iran and Syria became the only two states in the Middle East with an openly anti-American stance.⁴⁵ Iran is also, along with Russia, the main state supporting Assad's government in Syria. Moreover, Iran's alliance with Syria is strategic in nature: the political alliance dates to the period of the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s. Syria, which was hostile to Saddam at the time, sided with Iran.⁴⁶ Mutual contempt for Saddam Hussein's Iraq brought Syria and Iran together in 1980, and mutual fear and loathing of the United States and Israel has helped sustain their alliance.⁴⁷ In addition to being a political partner, Syria is also of crucial importance to Iran because it provides a geographical passageway to the Lebanese Shia militia Hezbollah, "one of the crown jewels of the Iranian revolution."⁴⁸ Both Syria and Hezbollah are crucial elements of the Iran-led alliance and much of Hezbollah's armaments, which pass through Damascus airport, is said to come from Iran.⁴⁹

From the perspective of the systemic level and US strategic culture, the hypothesis can be formulated that the US would support the rebels to overthrow Assad to weaken Iran. The following

paragraph further discusses how both presidents viewed this Iranian dimension in Syria.

Obama wanted anything but boots on the ground. But why? Among other motives, such as US war fatigue, one was never mentioned: the fear of treading on Iran's toes. It was long assumed that Obama made no connection between his Iran policy and his Syria policy. But that was not entirely the case: to secure the 2015 Joint Plan of Action (JPOA) with Iran to dismantle Iran's nuclear weapon program, he also showed respect for Iranian interests in Syria. In contrast, Trump resolutely chose a tougher policy towards Iran and rejected the JPOA. But US policy on the ground remained largely identical to that of his predecessor, leaving it to Israel to deal with the Iranian build-up in Syria. Moreover, the presence of US troops in Syria served both as an obstacle to the ambitions of Iran (and Russia), and as a source of influence for Washington in a possible political settlement of the conflict. But with Trump's decision to partially withdraw US troops, Russia and especially Iran – which sent thousands of proxies and its own elite troops to Syria – threaten to emerge as the dominant players in a country that shares a border with Israel.

Conclusion

In general, it is seen that both the Obama and Trump administrations tried to develop a strategy for Syria. A direct and large-scale military intervention such as in Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq or Libya was not considered by the Obama administration, in line with its promises to pull the US out of the Middle East. The idea of total non-intervention was quickly left when Obama started to (covertly) support opposition groups in their fight against Assad. Obama, however, was dubious, as he understood that even minimal intervention, such as arms delivery, could be construed as renewed foreign adventurism. The last thing Obama wanted when the 2012 election campaign got underway was “another complicated US military involvement in the Muslim world.”⁵⁰ But when, after three years of war, ISIS became stronger and stronger in Syria, the US position changed, and the administration

opted for a policy that focused on defeating ISIS in the region. Helping anti-Assad rebels was dropped as a priority. The fact that the US pursued a faster and more decisive policy with the arrival of ISIS, is in line with the US strategic culture of fighting terror. Yet this was a difficult policy exercise for Obama, given that he had made a promise to get the Americans out of the Middle East.

When Trump took office, he inherited from his predecessor an unstable region. From the outset, Trump's focus was on counterterrorism and Iran, which meant that few decisive policy choices were made regarding Assad or chemical weapons. Although Iran was a priority for Trump, anti-Iran policy on Syrian territory was actually left for Israel, which regularly carries out attacks against pro-Iranian militias. In addition, during Trump's term, we saw a withdrawal of support and troops from YPG/SDF-controlled territory, which also had further repercussions in the region. On other conflict lines, Trump initially continued Obama's policy. This is quite remarkable, given that when he took office, he gave a very different impression and mainly expressed an anti-Obama rhetoric.

After another gas attack in 2017, though, Trump ordered a punctual US military operation against installations of the Syrian government, which was a first in the policy towards Syria. Another striking change took place regarding the rebels. During Trump's presidency, it was decided to reduce support to opposition groups and to halt the CIA's *train-and-equip* program, which in this case is in line with Trump's promises to end costly entanglements abroad. Nonetheless, the war had progressed to such an extent that the international and systemic levels began to come into play. New actors appeared on the scene, logically shifting US priorities.

At the beginning of this paper, the question was raised how similarities and differences in Obama's and Trump's foreign policies towards the Syrian war could be explained. A change of power always brings change to a certain degree, and both presidents were so different in their

general policies and characteristics that the hypothesis was formulated that their policies on Syria would be very different. This expected discontinuity stems from the fact that Obama and Trump had different characters and political backgrounds and consequently different ideological views of the world. The more the personal background and beliefs of one president differ from those of the other, the greater the degree of policy change we would expect. In addition, one might expect discontinuity as Obama and Trump had a completely different team behind them. Although the objectives may have remained the same, new staff bring with them another way of 'doing business'.

Yet, after analysis, a certain continuity can be found, which can be explained by several factors. In the first place, public opinion has played a role in bringing continuity between both presidents and their policies. The sentiment of war-weariness still appears to be strongly present during the terms of office of Obama and Trump. This may well have played a decisive role in terms of policy choices. In any case, every administration has an eye on its electoral base and must therefore be sensitive to domestic public opinion. As Watkins already wrote in 1997, any government must therefore at least try to maintain the appearance of a balanced policy to retain its electoral base and stay in power.⁵¹

In this respect, it would not have been wise for Obama or Trump to make drastic policy shifts on

Syria. Yet, they found it difficult to make drastic foreign policy shifts and were carried away by the developments in Syria and more generally at the international level. Both administrations had to be mindful of the military balance in Syria: with Russian arms deliveries and since 2015 massive involvement on the ground, directly confronting the Syrian army, suffering American losses, and entering into a clash with Russia was not an option.

In addition, during their terms in office, US policymakers and Congress also played a role, which as well contributed to continuity in foreign policy towards Syria. Throughout this research, it was shown that on various conflict lines, Congress did not appear to be unimportant in the president's decision-making. The war-weariness from public and Congress cannot be ignored, and it is therefore difficult for a president to break through this for the sake of his own policy perceptions.

It can be concluded that under two very different presidents, Obama and Trump, US Syria policy took on a life of its own, often appearing almost immune to the executive branch in Washington. Both administrations were overtaken by reality and developments in the region and in Syria. Washington is thus once again committing itself to indefinite involvement in a civil war in the Middle East, even though the conflict broke out under a president who came into office promising the opposite.

¹ Paul K. Macdonald, "America First? Explaining Continuity and Change in Trump's Foreign Policy," *Political Science Quarterly* 133, no. 3 (2018): 401-434.

² Ibid.

³ Macdonald, "America First?," 401-434.

⁴ Philip BK Potter, "Does experience matter? American presidential experience, age, and international conflict," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 51, no. 3 (2007): 351-378.

⁵ James Steinberg, "The Bush foreign policy revolution," *New perspectives quarterly* 20, no. 3 (2003): 4-14.

⁶ Macdonald, "America First?," 401-434.

⁷ James M. Lindsay, "George W. Bush, Barack Obama and the future of US global leadership," *International Affairs* 87, no. 4 (2011): 765-779.

⁸ Hendra Manurung, and Albert Barita Sihombing. "US Policy & Geopolitical Dynamics in the Middle East: Shifting Decision from Barrack Obama (2012-2016) to Donald Trump (2017)," *AEGIS: Journal of International Relations* 1, no. 2 (2018).

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- ⁹ David Jervis, "Barack Obama, Syria, and the exertion of American military power," *TEKA of Political Science and International Relations* 12, no. 1 (2018): 41.
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