

RESEARCH TITLE

**The Role of U.S. Foreign Policy towards the Syrian Conflict:
A Critical Analysis of its Impact on the Syrian Democratic Forces**

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Abstract

This study provides a critical analysis of U.S. policy towards the Syrian conflict, with a focus on its impact on the Syrian Democratic Forces, and regional security. The Syrian conflict became a major key in the international issues since its beginning in 2011, and U.S. policy has been the main factor in shaping its trajectory. This study examines how U.S. policy toward the Syrian conflict has developed the Syrian Democratic Force and how this policy impacted regional security. This study relies on a wide range of primary and secondary sources, including media reports, policy documents, and expert analyses. It analyzes U.S. policy's key drivers and constraints towards the Syrian conflict, and how they have developed over time. It also investigates the impact of U.S. policy on the SDF, examining the ways in which U.S. support has shaped the group's capabilities and goals in Syria. Lastly, this study assesses the implication of the U.S. involvement in the Syrian conflict on regional security. How it has led to prolonging the Syrian conflict, the contribution to the Syrian Democratic Force, and the stability of the region.

Key Words: Foreign Policy, Syrian Conflict, Terrorism, Humanitarian crisis, Arab Spring, conflict implications.

دور السياسة الخارجية للولايات المتحدة تجاه الصراع السوري: تحليل نقدي لتأثيرها على قوات سوريا الديمقراطية

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المستخلص

تقدم هذه الدراسة تحليلاً نقدياً لسياسة الولايات المتحدة تجاه الصراع السوري ، مع التركيز على تأثيرها على قوات سوريا الديمقراطية والأمن الإقليمي. أصبح الصراع السوري قضية رئيساً في القضايا الدولية منذ بدايتها في عام 2011 ، وكانت السياسة الأمريكية هي العامل الرئيسي في تشكيل مسارها. تبحث هذه الدراسة في كيفية تطوير سياسة الولايات المتحدة تجاه الصراع السوري لقوة سوريا الديمقراطية وكيف أثرت هذه السياسة على الأمن الإقليمي. تعتمد هذه الدراسة على مجموعة واسعة من المصادر الأولية والثانوية ، بما في ذلك التقارير الإعلامية ووثائق السياسة وتحليلات الخبراء. يحلل الدوافع والقيود الرئيسية للسياسة الأمريكية تجاه الصراع السوري ، وكيف تطورت بمرور الوقت. كما أنه يحقق في تأثير السياسة الأمريكية على قوات سوريا الديمقراطية ، ويدرس الطرق التي شكل بها الدعم الأمريكي قدرات المجموعة وأهدافها في سوريا. أخيراً ، تقم هذه الدراسة بتأثير تورط الولايات المتحدة في الصراع السوري على الأمن الإقليمي. و كيف أدى إلى إطالة أمد الصراع السوري ، والمساهمة التي قدمتها في تطوير قوات سوريا الديمقراطية ، واستقرار المنطقة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: السياسة الخارجية، الصراع السوري، الإرهاب ، الأزمة الإنسانية ، الربيع العربي ، تداعيات الصراع.

1. Introduction

In 1970, Hafez al-Assad took power in Syria through a military coup called a “corrective revolution” (Lewis, 2021), which followed a long period of the country's oppressive and authoritarian rule. The period of Hafez al-Assad's rule was characterized by political repression and human rights violations. The ruling regime used violence and intimidation to suppress any voice that contradicted its political vision, and there were widespread human rights violations, and basic freedoms such as freedom of expression, and other freedoms (Heydemann, 2020).

The Syrian revolution has broken out in 2011 after the emergence of the Arab Spring, which appeared in Tunisia and spread to the countries of the region (PAX, 2021). The Syrian revolution was an expected event due to the lack of democracy, freedom, and justice in Syria for decades. When Bashar al-Assad, took over the authority in Syria in 2000, he was committed to his father's approach, he suppressed freedoms, and human rights, and imprisoned the politician's opponents (Laub, 2023). At the beginning of the revolution in 2011, the popular protests in Syria were calling for general reforms in the country, but due to the security grip in Syria and the suppression of peaceful demonstrators, the demands changed to overthrow the regime. After a few months, the popular revolution turned into a major struggle against the Syrian regime. In this regard, some of the Syrian soldiers began to split from the Syrian army and form an army parallel to the Syrian army to overthrow the regime (Laub, 2023).

Initially, US foreign policy towards the conflict in Syria revolved around resolving the conflict peacefully, persuading the Syrian president to step down from power, and preparing to build a democratic system that satisfies everyone (Kissinger, 2014, pp. 126-132). The intransigence of the Syrian regime and its allies has exacerbated the conflict, leading the US policy to take steps to force the Syrian regime and its allies to submit to negotiations. In this vein, two military operation rooms have been found in Jordan and Turkey, which was the beginning of the indirect intervention of the U.S. in the Syrian conflict. At that time the support was only for the moderate free army with logistical weapons to ensure that the Syrian regime and its allies would not win over the Syrian opposition. (Al-Aqili, 2021, pp. 59-73). However, the US foreign policy towards the Syrian conflict was centered on logistical support until ISIS appeared in Syria and Iraq in 2014. The U.S. announced an international coalition to confront terrorism in Syria and Iraq. After the announcement of the International Coalition against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant ISIS. ISIS started a battle against Ayn al-Arab Kobani in order to get control over that city, the battle lasted for nearly 4 months, and the Kurdish forces of the Democratic Union Party PYD proved their worth in repelling the ISIS attack made these groups the official ally of the U.S., despite the clear relation between the PYD and the PKK the U.S. made this group as an official ally to them in fighting terrorist groups. Although the PKK was classified on the terrorist list, nevertheless, the U.S. continued to support this group (Meoni, 2022, p. 7). Later, the United States supported the formation of the Syrian Democratic Forces SDF.

1.1. Problem Statement

After the beginning of the Syrian revolution and its transformation into an armed war, the foreign policies of some countries had a direct impact on shaping the conflict there, whereas, the majority of the Kurdish parties supported the Syrian revolution in the beginning. However, the emergence of ISIS in 2014, and the close relationship between the U.S and the Kurdish parties led to a change in the Kurdish group's policy which they resorted to fighting ISIS, and turn against the Syrian opposition, where Zamn Alwasl reported that the YPG, the wing of the PKK, committed a massacre against the opposition forces inside Afrin in 2016.

(Alwasl, 2016)

The U.S. foreign policy toward the Syrian conflict during Obama's administration had a negative impact on the course of the conflict, whereas, the miscalculation of Obama by solving the conflict in Syria led to the emergence of non-state actors like ISIS and SDF.

During the period of fighting ISIS the U.S focused on supporting the Kurdish parties, as the U.S worked on the development of the SDF in 2015, and later the U.S State Department considered this group to be their official ally in their fight against terrorism in the region (Masarat, 2016, pp. 3-4). The SDF group with the seeking to have self-determination inside Syria, led to the emergence of security problems in the region.

This thesis will address the role of U.S. foreign policy towards the conflict in Syria and its impact on the development of the SDF, and how this policy affected the stability of the region. This study aims to analyze how the miscalculation of Obama led to the escalation of tensions in the region and an increase in terrorism in the region, which has led to the complexity and exacerbation of the conflict in Syria. From this standpoint, this study aims to analyze the role of American foreign policy in the Syrian conflict, determine how this policy affects the Syrian Democratic Forces, and identify the factors that led to instability in the region. This research can help to have a better understanding of the political and military scene in Syria.

1.2. The Rationale of the Study

With the escalation of the situation in Syria in 2011 and the transformation of the revolution into a proxy war, the U.S. was one of the countries that got involved in the conflict there from its beginning. The policy of the U.S. had an important role in prolonging the conflict in Syria and the emergence of non-state actors such as ISIS and the SDF., which led to changes in the trajectory of the Syrian conflict, and the emergence of the security problem in the region. U.S. foreign policy towards Syria is among the most important controversial international issues at the present time, as the U.S. has been involved in the conflict for a long time, and plays a major role in the military and political operations on the Syrian conflict.

The U.S. supports the SDF since 2015, Over the past five years, has been sharply criticized for this support, as the SDF is linked to the PYD which is seen as the Syrian branch of PKK, which Turkey and other countries consider this group a terrorist organization.

the objective of the Study can be identified as follows:

- To identify, the impact of the Obama and Trump administration's policies toward the Syrian conflict.
- To identify how did U.S. policy shape the development of the Syrian Democratic Forces.
- To explain the implications of the U.S. policy on regional security dynamics.

This study is important for understanding American foreign policy towards the Syrian conflict and its impact on the region in general, and on the course of the Syrian conflict in particular, and it has relied on a variety of sources from academic journals, news reports, official websites, and specialized websites.

1.3. Research Questions And Hypothesis of the Study

In all the internal conflicts inside any country that the world has witnessed, the historical roots had a direct impact in igniting the conflict, but these historical conflicts must have an external state in order to awaken them and ignite them again. Therefore, this thesis assumes that the U.S. has played the main role in Syria in the development of the SDF group

after the Arab Spring in Syria, and this affected the prolongation of the conflict in Syria and it has a great impact on the security and stability of the region.

This thesis will answer these questions:

1. to what extent did the Obama and Trump administrations' policies impact the Syrian conflict?
2. How did U.S. policy shape the development of the Syrian Democratic Forces?
3. what are the implications of the U.S. policy on regional security dynamics?

In order to answer these questions, previous studies and literature reviews that dealt with this topic will be addressed, and also in addition to this will be added a review of news and articles that dealt with the Syrian conflict since the beginning in 2011 and a review of analyzes and political statements in this regard.

Based on the research questions there is one main hypothesis that the thesis developed:

Although the historical factors of the SDF were already present, the American foreign policy towards the conflict in Syria was a major reason for the development of this group. The hypothesis of this study will be explored how the U.S. foreign policy toward the conflict in Syria played an important role in the formation and development of the SDF and its implications on regional security. The main reason for conducting this research is because consider the U.S. is the main key major in the Syrian conflict and its contribution by its policy to prolonging the conflict in Syria. And contributed mainly to the destabilization of the region by developing the SDF group.

2. Literature reviews

During President Obama's term, there were many factors indicating that the U.S. was seeking a radical change in Syria. Since the start of the Syrian revolution, the U.S. on more than one occasion has clarified its attitude against Bashar al-Assad's policy, whereas U.S. President Obama, called on Bashar al-Assad to step down from power (Telegraph, 2011). The world had a feeling that US President Barack Obama would exercise his authority extensively in order to resolve the conflict in Syria.

Among those indicators that consolidate this feeling is the doctrine of the “red line” drawn by US President Obama, and the many promises made by Obama regarding the removal of Assad from power, and despite all these indicators, there were only a few measures taken against the Syrian regime in the era of Obama. In this regard, many scholars and academics have written to try to explain the behavior of the United States of America toward the conflict in Syria.

For example, Bacevich believes that President Obama caused the deterioration of the situation in Syria and the drift of the conflict there into a civil war because of his lack of enthusiasm towards the Syrian issue (Bacevich, 2016). Zisser believes that American policy during the Obama era greatly affected the credibility of the United States of America (Zisser, 2013, pp. 59-65). On the other hand, Weiss argues that Obama, with his unbalanced policy, led to the collapse of the Free Syrian Army, which was fighting the Bashar al-Assad regime (WEISS, 2014). Titus believes that the complications of the war in Syria were due to Obama's incompetence in global leadership. Titus believes that the complications of the war in Syria were due to Obama's inefficiency in global leadership (TITUS, 2018). The former US ambassador to Russia, McFaul, believes that Obama's policy towards Syria was a failure, as involving Russia in resolving the conflict in Syria was a fatal mistake, and transferring the Syrian file to the United Nations was also a fatal mistake, which exacerbated the conflict

(Roberts, 2018).

On the other hand, some believed that Obama's policy towards the conflict in Syria was restricted by many factors and variables that directly affected the U.S towards the conflict in Syria.

Kissinger saw that the Syrian revolution turned into a civil war and the intervention of many players made the United States cautious in its intervention in Syria (Kissinger, 2014). Jasmine argues that American policy was constrained by three main factors, namely, public opinion, the lack of international desire in the G20 to intervene in Syria, and Obama's hesitation in making decisions (Gani, 2019). Ahmed adds to that, that the absence of a group of interests for the Syrians in America had a significant impact on Obama's negative policy towards the conflict in Syria (ATEŞ, 2021).

Additionally, Al Aqili sees that during the Obama administration, there were several factors prevented Obama to intervene directly in Syria, like public opinion, the global economic crisis in 2008, and the intervention of international actors like Russia and Iran that made Obama more careful about his steps in Syria to avoid any confrontation with any other country. (Al-Aqili, 2021, pp. 59-73).

Also, Boke shares the same opinion with Al Aqili he claims the U.S. policy in Syria, At the beginning of the conflict in Syria hesitates to intervene directly because of their intervention in Libya. And he add that, the US saw the Syrian conflict differently from the Libyan one, they saw it as a sectarian conflict seeking to end the minority regime not a conflict for a democratic purpose which made America hesitate to direct intervention. (BOKE, 2016, pp. 240-265).

On the other hand, there were those who believed that the American policy towards Syria during the Obama era was trying to present American interests over any other consideration.

Renovino believes that the U.S was afraid of a repeat of the scenario that happened in Afghanistan and the rise of extremist Islamic groups, so it was reluctant to arm the Syrian opposition with qualitative weapons (RIJNOVEANU, 2013). However, Schulhofer believes that the American policy did not want to intervene directly in Syria, and therefore found support for the Syrian opposition with light weapons to evade any commitments towards the conflict in Syria. And he believes that Syria was not among the priorities of US policy during the Obama era, but the internal pressures were a major reason for the formation of this policy, as this policy relied on prevarication and prioritization (Schulhofer-Wohl, 2021, pp. 533-538).

Moussa believes that US policy later was limited to support for groups that owed allegiance to it, such as the Kurdish groups that controlled the oil and gas areas in Syria (MOSSA, 2016). Dr. Mustafa believes that Obama took in his policy the approach of procrastination and evading the commitments he had made, in order to prolong the conflict in Syria, and therefore he believes that the main goal of this policy is to make Syria a burner for all jihadists around the world and to get rid of them by striking them with Shiite militias and the Syrian regime and its allies (Gharib, 2019).

On the other hand, some believe that the reason for the deterioration of the situation in Syria is due to the miscalculations that Obama made, and the influence of liberal theory on his policy. Like (Kardaş, 2013) (Mazza–Hilway, 2019) who believe that Obama was influenced by liberal values and principles since he was liberal in his belief, and for this he was resorting to negotiations and cooperation between the countries involved in the conflict.

In contrast to Obama's policy, Trump's policy was more confrontational, as Obama's policy was a major cause of prolonging the conflict in Syria and the emergence of terrorist groups.

This made Trump's policy inclined to direct confrontation without caring about the results. This policy witnessed the killing and assassination of many ISIS leaders, such as the founder of this organization, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, and also Iranian leaders such as Qassem Soleimani, but this policy neglected the Syrian file and focused on supporting the Syrian Democratic Forces in its struggle against terrorism and putting pressure on Iran in Syria and Iraq from order to undermine its role there.

Dia believes that Trump's policy towards the conflict in Syria was based on two main pillars: fighting extremist Islamic groups and undermining Iran's role in the region (Noah, 2017, pp. 1-23). Al-Aqeel discusses that Trump focused his policy on supporting the Syrian Democratic Forces in order to strengthen this entity to preserve America's interests in Syria (Al-Aqili, 2021).

(Ford, 2018) believed that Trump with his support for the Kurdish groups would eliminate terrorism and bring the Syrian regime to the table of dialogue, but Trump sees Syria as not that important to America, so he focused in his policy on fighting terrorism and delegating Iran there so that it would not be a base for striking their main ally, Israel.

(Magazine, 2019) Trump's policy was due to Obama's mistakes, as he was trying to eliminate terrorism by supporting the Syrian Democratic Forces, but at the same time he does not want to lose some of his allies in the region, such as Turkey, so it showed some confusion in his policy and his lack of clarity of vision. Especially when abandoning his Kurdish allies in 2019 in favor of Turkey.

In general, academics agree that Trump's policy in Syria was not giving importance to the Syrian file, but rather focused on fighting extremist Islamic groups by strengthening the Syrian Democratic Forces and undermining Iran's role in the region. This policy had major negative consequences.

Several researchers have addressed the impact of U.S. policy on the Syrian conflict, but there is a gap in the literature regarding the impact of U.S. policy on the Syrian conflict by the emergence of non-state actors and the Syrian Democratic Forces and how this policy has contributed to their rose security problems in the region. This is an important area to find out and understand the role of U.S. policy in the development of the Syrian Democratic force. Which will give new insights into the impact of U.S. policy on the Syrian conflict and regional security dynamics. Therefore, this study is needed to address this gap and fill this important gap with the necessary knowledge in the existing literature.

3. The Research Method of the Study

This study will use a qualitative method for data collection due to the emphasis in political research on thoughts, ideas, and understanding the individual behaviors, and beliefs. According to constructivist perspectives, these factors play an important role in shaping the policy among states (Wendt, 1992). As a result, the qualitative method becomes essential for providing non-numerical and non-statistical explanations of political phenomena. It depends on an analysis of narratives, storytelling, focus groups, interviews, and expert observations, which are precisely the methods required to address the existing gap in our current research (Steinmetz, 2021, pp. 225-240).

As mentioned before, The primary objective of this study is to explore the U.S policy in Syria and its role in development of the SDF and critically analyze the factors that influenced its development, and subsequently examine how these developments have affected regional stability.

To identify the gaps in this study, this study will conduct a comprehensive review of existing

literature on the same topic and related topics near our subjects. Through analyzing data and insights gathered from academic and scholarly works, this study will aim to identify areas where knowledge is lacking. To address these gaps, primary sources such as speeches by US leaders, interviews with political officials, official documents, government announcements, and statements made by decision-makers will be scrutinized and incorporated into the study.

Furthermore, interviews with academics, scholars, and political analysts who have discussed similar topics will be examined as primary sources. Additionally, to ensure diverse and unbiased information, this thesis will incorporate articles, reports, and recently published works as secondary sources for data collection in the research process.

4. Findings

The US foreign policy towards the conflict in Syria has a role in prolonging the conflict and its impact on the emergence of some non-state actors such as ISIS and the Syrian Democratic Forces. The policy of the previous administration led by President Obama focused on the balance of power between the regime and the opposition without taking effective measures to find a political solution to end the conflict. And the decision not to direct military intervention by the United States and not to provide sufficient military support to the moderate opposition, contributed to the continuation of the conflict and the failure to achieve an effective balance of forces that pushes towards a political solution.

Moreover, the US administration's reversal of its steps after the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons, the failure to implement the threats, and the punishment by the U.S. on the Syrian regime, made the Syrian regime not respect the red lines that were drawn by the U.S. administration. This retreat and hesitation in confronting the use of chemical weapons gave regional countries and superpowers a signal that there is no firm and strong engagement with the Syrian crisis from the U.S. This, in turn, prompted some countries and extremist groups to become more involved in the conflict.

Therefore, it can be said that the hesitation of the previous US administration and its cautious policy in Syria, and the preference for negotiation at the expense of military action and cooperation with the countries allied to the Syrian regime, contributed to the creation of a vacuum in the Syrian arena that was filled by terrorist militias and ISIS. After the emergence of ISIS in Syria, the United States formed the Syrian Democratic Forces in 2015, which consists mainly of Kurdish groups and some Arab groups, with the aim of fighting ISIS. However, there was a direct link between the SDF and the PKK, which raised security problems in the region. Turkey saw the United States support for these groups as a direct threat to Turkish national security, as these groups aimed to establish a state on the Turkish border.

Under President Trump, U.S. support for these groups has increased, leading to escalating tensions between Turkey and the United States. In response, Turkey launched military operations targeting these groups and aiming to keep them away from the Turkish border, including Operation Olive Branch and Euphrates Shield, which liberated large areas on the Syrian-Turkish border. It can be said that Trump's policy towards the conflict in Syria was mainly focused on fighting extremist Islamic groups and weakening Iran's role. But this policy had a negative impact on the course of the conflict in Syria. It led to the marginalization of the Syrian conflict and the tilt of the conflict in favor of the Syrian regime, which later took control of large areas in Syria.

The inclination of the conflict in Syria towards the Syrian regime has weakened negotiations regarding a political solution to the conflict. Challenges and obstacles accumulated in order to reach a peaceful agreement, as the conflicting parties were unable to agree on the future of

Syria and the distribution of power and interests. Subsequently, the scope of the conflict expanded and the dynamics were complicated by multilateral intervention, including that of Russia and Iran on the side of the Syrian regime. Tensions and military escalation increased, and priorities shifted to combating extremist groups and combating terrorism, while efforts to find a comprehensive and sustainable political solution were weakened.

Despite the international efforts exerted to achieve peace in Syria, the intransigence of the Syrian regime, the incompatibility of the conflicting parties, the multiple external interventions, and the competing interests made it difficult to achieve significant progress toward ending the conflict and achieving comprehensive stability in Syria. Although the United States is a major player in the conflict in Syria, US foreign policy alone cannot be fully blamed for prolonging the conflict and not achieving a political solution in Syria. The many external interventions and the regional and local complications have played a major role in the continuation and complexity of the conflict. Competing interests and agendas multiplied, and complex tensions and conflicts were exacerbated, leading to the continuation of the war and preventing the achievement of a comprehensive political settlement.

5. Conclusion

It can be said that the conflict in Syria has been complicated by the interplay of many complex factors and various external interventions. American foreign policy has undergone different shifts and directions, whether under the Obama or Trump administrations and has had varying effects on the conflict. It is clear that the United States focus on combating extremist Islamic groups, undermining Iran's role, and accumulating efforts to achieve a comprehensive political solution contributed to the complication of the situation and the prolongation of the conflict. The interference of external parties and the overlapping of competing interests led to the continuation of violence and the complexity of the peace process. It is necessary for there to be greater international consensus and serious efforts to end the conflict in Syria and achieve comprehensive peace. The concerned parties must assume their responsibilities in finding a political solution that guarantees justice and stability and fulfills the aspirations of the Syrian people.

The necessary international and humanitarian support must be provided to rebuild the infrastructure and achieve a democratic and economic transition in Syria. Despite the great challenges, he must not lose hope of achieving peace in Syria. The international community should continue to cooperate and coordinate to enhance mediation and negotiation efforts, and to promote dialogue and understanding between the conflicting parties. With joint action and political will, we can hope to end the conflict and rebuild Syria as a secure and prosperous country. To achieve peace in Syria, comprehensive efforts and international consensus are required.

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