

It remains to be seen if ISIS will provide Washington with an opportunity to recover its strategy and reputation over Syria.

*One year ago, the Obama Administration came within a hair's breadth of bombing the forces of Bashar al-Assad in Syria after evidence came to light that his forces had used chemical weapons against civilians. Now, the US, with the help of allies in the Gulf, is bombing ISIS targets in Iraq and Syria. **Jasmine Gani** argues that US policy on Syria has changed because its goals now centre on counter-terrorism, rather than regime change. She warns that the strikes may be working in Assad's favour, and that they may also act to further fragment the opposition to the Syrian regime.*



On 10 September, Barack Obama announced plans for military operations against ISIS in Iraq and Syria; since then his administration has been uncharacteristically quick to follow up on its word. Of the two operations, those in Syria have garnered the most scrutiny, uncertainty and controversy. First, Obama was reticent to offer much detail on his military intentions regarding Syria – his initial speech mostly focused on Iraq, an altogether more straightforward and familiar campaign for the US, and eliciting a [higher level of domestic support](#). This suggested that the government was yet to devise a suitable strategy over Syria. Second, the greater geopolitical complexity and questionable legal grounds of US intervention in Syria seemed to justify Obama's cautious instinct on this occasion.

This turned out to be a red herring, as the US military followed up its attacks on ISIS bases in Iraq with new air strikes over Syrian towns Raqqa and Idlib last Monday. In the context of US reluctance to offer an active strategy for Syria over the last three and a half years, the decisiveness of its military intervention in the past week marks a significant turn. Previously, the US was accused of being bereft of ideas and failing to provide the leadership needed to end the devastating conflict. What has changed to apparently alter the US approach, and does this latest wave of military intervention reflect a rediscovered purpose and clarity in US strategy over Syria and the Middle East in general?

Obama's Syria Policy since 2011

In the first phase of the Syrian crisis, the US projected enthusiastic rhetoric for the uprising, anticipating the swift fall of the Ba'thist regime. In contrast to the dilemma that Mubarak and even Gaddafi posed for Washington, the removal of President Bashar al-Assad was uncontroversial and viewed as an opportunity for a favourable geopolitical realignment in the region. The US administration gave its firm political support to the armed rebel groups loosely brought together as the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and its political wing, the Syrian National Coalition though it was always reluctant to offer military backing via arms and funding, it [continued to give the impression it would do so](#) if the FSA could prove it was a united, moderate and effective ally. In reality, the US was in no mood to militarily engage in another Middle East crisis because: a) the American public were war-weary after a decade of involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq, and Obama preferred to stick with a cautious policy of 'leading from behind'; b) as the uprisings transcended into a full-blown conflict, the risks of intervention and regional conflagration were considered to be too great with relatively few returns for US national interests; and c) as Iran, Hizbullah and foreign jihadist fighters entered the fray, there was a tacit recognition that a war of attrition contained within Syria's borders could advantageously drain and weaken all of the US's main enemies in the region.



President Barack Obama and Vice President Joe Biden meet with members of the National Security Council in the Situation Room of the White House, Sept. 10, 2014. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)

The underlying strategy has thus been highly realist and cautious from the Obama administration. It has prioritised national interest and retrenchment, and deemed both humanitarian intervention and democracy promotion as too risky with unforeseeable consequences – arguably sensible for the US in light of its foray in Iraq and the complexity of the Syrian crisis, but jarring with America’s self-identity and the image it wishes to portray of itself on the world stage. This dilemma has been reflected by an external policy incoherence, in which the government’s realism has been undermined by [public statements committing itself to action](#), and regular promises of an imminent policy change in favour of arming the rebels; this rhetoric was intended to keep the rebels onside, maintain pressure on Assad, and deflect domestic and international criticism of US apathy; yet as things currently stand it has failed on all three counts.

The deadly chemical attacks which killed over a thousand innocent civilians in Ghouta just over a year ago marked a turning point for the US. Not, as it turned out, via a decision to intervene; instead, the event exposed the realism of US policy over Syria, one which very obviously did not tally with its public statements. Though the administration defended its tactics by pointing to the wisdom of the ensuing chemical weapons agreement, the tags of apathy, impotence or (especially among Syrian critics) of duplicity, has been damaging – not only for the credibility of the US, but also for its capacity to mobilise and unite regional and international efforts in search of a resolution. In the meantime, regional actors Saudi Arabia, Iran, Qatar, Hizbullah, Turkey, and most significantly in the past year ISIS, have continued to shape developments on the ground, regardless of US actions and international debates. This has reconfigured the original parameters of the conflict informing US policy: it is no longer contained within Syria’s porous borders, and no longer ‘just’ a humanitarian issue beyond the US’s realist remit; it is now an urgent matter of regional security with direct implications for US allies and its interests in the Middle East.

Has ISIS given the US a strategy for Syria?

In one sense, ISIS has provided Washington with an opportunity to recover both its strategy and reputation over Syria. Its attempt to do so last September over the chemical attacks was beset with problems: the lack of clear goals, lack of clear linkage with US interests or legal justification; fears of a repeat of Iraq under George W. Bush; and the failure to convey a coherent message to the American public and the international community, stalled military strikes that were intended to show the world that the US was *doing something*. This time, with the target being ISIS, Washington has been more successful in conveying a narrowed set of goals that sit within the familiar framework of counter-terrorism – seemingly less ambitious and less contentious than regime change. Already the US has made progress, militarily by destroying ISIS bases and halting their advance in northern Syria, and

politically by rallying a coalition of Arab states to offset allegations of unilateralism.

However, any gains made from the air strikes should be judged against the negative consequences, which are likely to have a far greater bearing on the next phase of the Syrian conflict, and in turn on US policy.

First, the air strikes, for now, have worked in Assad's favour. Last summer his regime was the target, this year the US and its allies have turned their firepower on one of Assad's most significant opponents. The regime believed it had come out as winners after the chemical weapons agreement, reasserting itself as the de facto government of Syria with whom the international powers had to do business. In the months that followed, the regime took over major rebel strongholds such as Homs and Yabroud, and assumed they had the opposition on the back foot. This summer, however, the regime suffered substantial losses in territory and personnel at the hands of ISIS, with a particularly [humiliating defeat in Raqqa](#).

Rising criticism from Assad's own Alawi community, accusing him of failing to safeguard their security, and signs of dispute within the regime (apparently borne out by intelligence chief [Hafez Makhoul's recent exile to Belarus](#)), reflected the regime's growing vulnerability. There were signs that some of his supporters were now starting to see Assad as a part of the problem, rather than a rallying figure. However, American airstrikes have deflected some of the pressure off the regime, firstly by taking the fight with ISIS off the regime's hands; secondly, it enables the regime to regroup and galvanise its support base with renewed accusations of a western conspiracy to destroy Syria and the 'resistance' axis. The direct involvement of Saudi Arabia and Gulf states, already despised by the Ba'th and its supporters as puppets of the US, will provide further ammunition for the regime's ideological and sectarian narrative.

Second, if the US was already frustrated with attempts to cultivate a reliable, moderate opposition before, then the problem has just doubled. Groups that were focused on fighting regime forces have now turned their attention to the US. Jubhat al-Nusra's bases in Idlib were bombed last week in an expansion of US targets beyond ISIS. Designated as an extremist group by the US, it also attracts large swathes of support from Syrian civilians for its effectiveness in pushing back both regime and ISIS forces, and not least because it is largely made up of local Syrian fighters. Since the airstrikes, the al-Nusra front has [vowed to concentrate its fight against the US](#). Other rebel groups have followed suit. Meanwhile, reports of rising civilian casualties, the bombing of food stores and market places has led to large [civilian protests across Syria](#) denouncing the US. With a large faction having previously called upon the US to come to their aid and even to militarily intervene against the regime, the tide of Syrian public opinion – both in the country and among the diaspora – has turned dramatically against the US. Worse still for Washington, ISIS has boasted that it is likely to gain more recruits as a result of the US-led campaign. Having [admitted on Sunday night](#) that US intelligence underestimated the threat of ISIS, it is unfathomable that Obama and his administration might also have underestimated the potential extremist blowback against its latest military venture.

Third, the group that has potentially the most to lose from America's bombing campaign is, ironically, the FSA and the Syrian Opposition Coalition, exactly countering Washington's long-term game plan. Its leader Hadi al-Bahra has publicly [supported the US strikes](#) at a time when his compatriots ([including FSA affiliates](#)) have turned in the opposite direction; furthermore, the Opposition Coalition's assertions that the strikes against ISIS will in some way help remove Assad remain tenuous at this stage. Should the US extend its strikes to regime targets, the likely international fall out, embroiling Russia and China, would be grave: current US adventurism is unlikely to extend that far. The US's deliberate concentration on ISIS instead of the regime has only fuelled criticism of the Opposition Coalition, and the diminishing returns of its alliance with the west. Their capacity to speak for the wider opposition movement and legitimacy on the ground was already in question before now; this latest episode could irrevocably undermine its credibility among the local Syrian population. That would create an even greater polarisation between the warring factions, making a political settlement – which any resolution to the conflict must ultimately rest on – even more distant.

So has the emergence of ISIS inadvertently provided the US with a renewed strategy for Syria? In the short term, yes – it enables the US to act in a limited capacity, responding to domestic pressure and international doubts over America's influence, and to some degree halting the advance of ISIS. However, the military option does not reflect a long term strategy and is rarely conducive to stability in the aftermath – aptly highlighted by Iraq and

Libya. The opportunity to use the Syrian regime's recent vulnerability to extract concessions, and move the parties towards a political settlement has been missed yet again; instead, a new and potent cause for continued conflict has been introduced into the arena. In light of the above developments, Obama's late abandonment of caution and resort to military intervention is not a sustainable strategy, and is set to complicate matters further.

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