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## Introduction

*I was skeptical of the “right side of history” argument, simply because in my own experience in the Middle East, history rarely moved in a straight line. Revolutions were complicated, and most often ended messily, with the best-organized rather than the best-intentioned reaping the immediate gains.<sup>1</sup>*

*William J. Burns, the U.S. diplomat,  
in 2011 – Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs*

**Relevance of the study.** More than 12 years have passed since the start of the Syrian Civil War. The conflict took the lives of 162,390<sup>2</sup> to 306,887<sup>3</sup> civilians, according to various estimates, and the total number of victims of the conflict, as of March 2023, has already exceeded 600,000<sup>4</sup>. Almost 13 million Syrians were forced to change their place of residence, of which 6.7 million became refugees, i.e. left the country. Finally, 15 million people in Syria are in need of humanitarian assistance, and 12 million are experiencing food shortages<sup>5</sup> – given the fact that the country has a population of 22.5 million people!<sup>6</sup> It is not difficult to figure out that more than two-thirds of the population of Syria are thus in distress.

Internationalization of the Syrian conflict which began in the early stages of the war has played not the last role in the artificial prolongation of the Syrian conflict and, accordingly, the increase in the number of victims. Back in 2016, the well-known Russian orientalist Boris V. Dolgov rightly pointed out that “while there are, albeit to a lesser extent, internal problems, the main causes of the ongoing [Syrian] crisis are external factors,” namely “the support of armed anti-government groups by external forces that are trying to use the Syrian internal conflict to achieve their strategic goals.”<sup>7</sup>

Started as a civil strife, the Syrian conflict over time attracted more and more actors and became more and more multilayered. The civil war between the government and the opposition, the

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<sup>1</sup> *Burns W.* The Back Channel: A Memoir of American Diplomacy and the Case for Its Renewal. (In Russ.). Moscow: Alpina Publisher, 2021. P. 417.

<sup>2</sup> Syrian Revolution 12 years on | Nearly 614,000 persons killed since the onset of the revolution in March 2011 // The Syrian Observatory For Human Rights. March 15, 2023. URL: <https://www.syriaahr.com/en/291981/> (accessed: 28.03.2023)

<sup>3</sup> UN Human Rights Office estimates more than 306,000 civilians were killed over 10 years in Syria conflict // UN Human Rights Office. June 28, 2022. URL: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/06/un-human-rights-office-estimates-more-306000-civilians-were-killed-over-10> (accessed: 28.03.2023)

<sup>4</sup> Syrian Revolution 12 years on... URL: <https://www.syriaahr.com/en/291981/> (accessed: 28.03.2023)

<sup>5</sup> Syria // Global Center for the Responsibility to Protect. February 28, 2023. URL: <https://www.globalr2p.org/countries/syria/> (accessed: 28.03.2023)

<sup>6</sup> Syria says its population is about 22.5 million (In Russ.) // RT in Russian. January 31, 2023. URL: <https://russian.rt.com/world/news/1104140-siriya-naselenie-chislennost> (accessed: 28.03.2023)

<sup>7</sup> *Dolgov B.* The phenomenon of the “Arab Spring” 2011-2016: Causes, Development, Prospects. Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Algeria. (In Russ.). Moscow: LENAND, 2016. P. 94-95.

confrontation between Iran and the Gulf monarchies, the fight against the Islamists, the Kurdish-Turkish confrontation, the Iranian-Israeli “shadow war” – all these additional contradictions were layered on top of each other, each time more and more confusing the already complex “Syrian puzzle.”

However, even against the backdrop of countless external players, the United States of America played a paramount role in turning the Syrian conflict into what it is to this day – into an arena for geopolitical confrontation between various global and regional powers. Of course, the importance of Washington's policy should not be overestimated and its position should not be turned into the only significant factor in the development of the conflict. At the same time, it is hard to deny that the U.S., which was on the wane of the “unipolar moment” and unquestionably dominant in the Middle East, had all the necessary resources – economic, political, military – to play a crucial role in determining the future of Syria. All of this makes it vital to explore how the United States exercised its influence in practice and how its policies defined and shaped the Syrian conflict.

Another important issue that requires a thorough study is the continuity of the Syrian policy of the three American administrations that had to deal with this conflict – Barack Obama, Donald Trump and Joe Biden. On the one hand, all three presidents differed greatly in their foreign policy preferences, management style, as well as their views directly on the Syrian conflict. However, on the other hand, a number of experts note a significant continuity in foreign policy both between Obama and Trump<sup>8</sup>, and between Trump and Biden<sup>9</sup>. All this raises the question of the extent to which the policy towards Syria, which at certain moments was almost at the center of the entire U.S. Middle East policy, was influenced by momentary foreign and domestic political factors, and to what extent was it the product of systemic pressure on the Washington.

Finally, an important problem is the global factor of the Syrian conflict. As noted above, the Syrian Civil War very quickly turned into a “grey-zone” where the interests of many great powers and regional players intersected. Not least, this also affected the United States, which in Syria entered into a confrontation with Iran and Russia, to a lesser extent with China, in part with its formal ally Türkiye, and in recent years even with the monarchies of the Persian Gulf. Thus, the Syrian conflict involuntarily assumed the role of a kind of a miniature, which reflected the entire U.S. Middle East policy for the period under study, which, undoubtedly, is subject to serious reflection.

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<sup>8</sup> E.g., *Donnelly T., Kristal W.* The Obama-Trump Foreign Policy // American Enterprise Institute. February 9, 2018. URL: <https://www.aei.org/articles/the-obama-trump-foreign-policy/> (accessed: 28.03.2023); *Sanger D.* A Strategy of Retreat in Syria, With Echoes of Obama // The New York Times. December 19, 2018. URL:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/19/us/politics/trump-syria-withdrawal-obama.html> (accessed: 28.03.2023)

<sup>9</sup> E.g., *Ramesh A.* On foreign policy, Biden is more Trump lite than Obama 2.0 // The Hill. July 19, 2021. URL: <https://thehill.com/opinion/white-house/563676-on-foreign-policy-biden-is-more-trump-lite-than-obama-20/> (accessed: 28.03.2023); *Suslov D.* A new paradigm of US foreign policy and relations with Russia (In Russ.) // RIAC. November 17, 2021. URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/comments/novaya-paradigma-vneshney-politiki-ssha-i-otnosheniya-s-rossiey/> (accessed: 28.03.2023); *Larison D.* Biden’s first year in foreign policy was a master class in continuity // Responsible Statecraft. December 30, 2021. URL: <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2021/12/30/bidens-first-year-in-foreign-policy-was-a-master-class-in-continuity/> (accessed: 28.03.2023)

Given this, it is worth adding separately that a detailed study of the U.S. policy in Syria is of great importance for Russian foreign policy, taking into account the current nature of U.S.-Russian relations. The emphasis on the consideration of specific foreign policy mechanisms used by the United States in Syria will increase the predictability of further U.S. actions in general, in the region and towards Syrian crisis in particular.

**The purpose of the dissertation research** is to create a complete picture of the U.S. policy towards the Syrian conflict, to identify a system of goals, priorities and methods of the American leadership in relation to the conflict.

To achieve the goal, the following **tasks** were set:

- To explore the history of U.S.-Syrian relations prior to the period under study;
- To determine what various external and internal factors influenced the formation and implementation of the U.S. foreign policy towards the Syrian conflict;
- To analyze the diplomatic steps taken by the U.S. in connection with the Syrian war;
- To study U.S. relations with countries whose interests in Syria conflicted with those of the U.S.;
- To explore the history of the work of U.S. programs to supply and train the Syrian “moderate opposition”;
- Analyze the course of the U.S. military intervention in the Syrian conflict;
- Research U.S. sanctions policy on Syria;
- Identify commonalities and differences in the approach of all three U.S. administrations to the Syrian conflict;
- Based on the analysis carried out, draw a conclusion about the nature of the evolution of the U.S. approach to the Syrian conflict.

**The object of the study** is the U.S. Middle East policy, while **the subject** is the U.S. policy towards the Syrian conflict, which refers to specific political, diplomatic, economic, military (including proxy) actions and measures taken by Washington regarding the emergence and development of the conflict.

**The chronological framework of the study** covers the period from March 15, 2011 to December 31, 2022. The upper limit is the generally accepted in the West the date for the start of the “Syrian revolution”, the so-called “Day of Wrath”, when the streets of the largest cities in Syria for the first time since the 1980s were crowded with hundreds of people, who came out with economic and political demands. The lower limit is due to the regular “shift change” of the legislature in the United States, where the 118th Congress began work on January 3, 2023, in which the Republican Party again received the majority in the House of Representatives. The three days of January 2023 are not significant for our study, and therefore, for convenience of the calculations will be omitted.

At the same time, it is worth noting that the established framework is quite flexible, since in certain places the research goes beyond them. Firstly, the previous history of U.S.-Syrian relations established in 1944 is of great importance for our study. Secondly, many trends and features inherent in U.S. foreign policy in general and Middle East policy in particular also take their roots from the period preceding the one under consideration. Thirdly, the foreign policy views of the American elites (presidents and members of their cabinet), that require consideration according to the chosen methodological approach, were also formed in previous years. Fourthly, some trends, especially during the presidency of Joe Biden, later received a certain development, which also requires for, albeit partial, but still consideration.

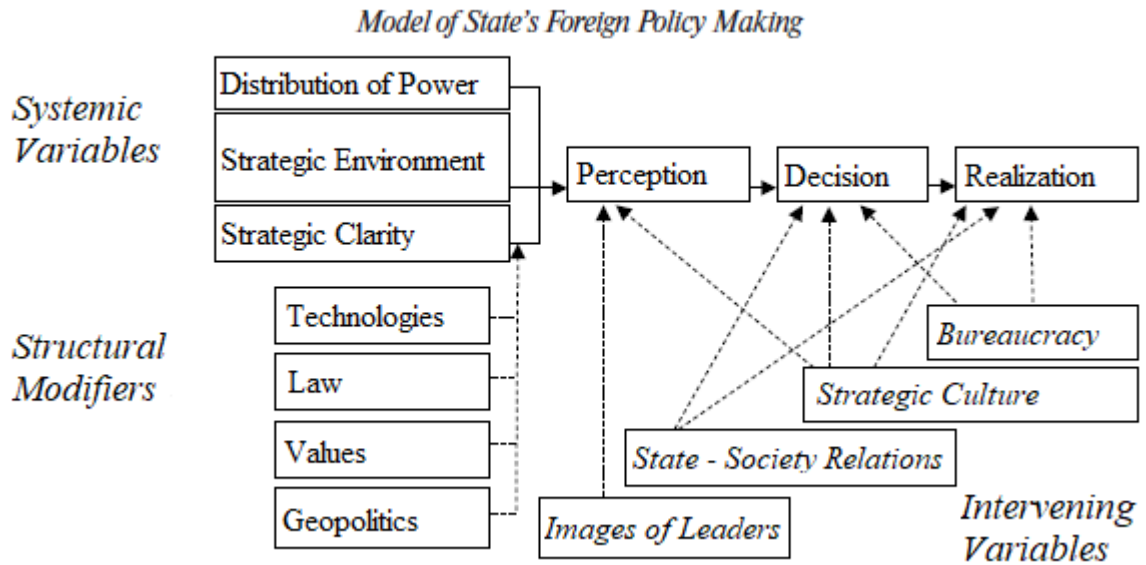
**The territorial scope of the study** for a number of reasons goes beyond the borders of the Syrian Arab Republic. First, in its Syrian policy, the United States actively used the territory of other countries in the region that were its allies, especially Türkiye, Jordan and Iraq. Secondly, the intervention of the U.S. and its allies in Libya, which unfolded in the spring of 2011, will also be somewhat examined by us because of its certain significance for the second chapter of the study, devoted to the Syrian policy of the Obama administration. Thirdly, the peace talks in Geneva and Astana will also be touched upon in this paper. Fourthly, the American leadership made all decisions regarding the Syrian conflict on its territory, which also requires its inclusion in the territorial framework of the study.

**The theoretical basis of the study** is the realist paradigm of international relations in its neoclassical version, most fully and systematically described in the “Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics” by N. Ripsman, J. Taliaferro and S. Lobell<sup>10</sup>. *Neoclassical realism*, in essence, is a theory of the foreign policy of the state, located somewhere in between of the classical realism of H. Morgenthau and the neorealism of K. Waltz. A feature of this theory is the expansion of the number of variables, under the influence of which the foreign policy of the state is formed, and not only at the “systemic, but at the elemental (state) level”<sup>11</sup> (for a more detailed diagram, see Fig. 1).

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<sup>10</sup> Ripsman N.M., Taliaferro J.W., Lobell S.E. *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. 208 p.

<sup>11</sup> Konyshov V. Neoclassical Realism on International Relations Theory (In Russ.) // Polis. Political studies. 2020, №4. P. 100. DOI: 10.17976/jpps/2020.04.07

Figure 1<sup>12</sup>

Largely due to the wide use of internal political or, in accordance with the language of this theory, “intervening” variables by neoclassical realism, this approach was chosen by us as the theoretical basis of the study. The wide influence of domestic political events and factors both on the formation and implementation of the foreign policy of the United States<sup>13</sup>, and in general on the current state of the world order<sup>14</sup>, has long been no secret to the scientific and expert community. Thus, using the optics of neoclassical realism will allow us to explore the U.S. policy towards the Syrian conflict in its entirety.

In addition, this study is based on the principles of historicism and consistency. The *principle of historicism*, which calls on the researcher to consider a historical phenomenon in its development and in relation to other phenomena, allows us to place the U.S. policy in Syria in context, find out its origins, understand why U.S.-Syrian relations turned out to be such a situation by 2011, and what further actions in this context seemed logical. *The principle of consistency* helps to consider the various directions of the U.S. policy in Syria in a complex and recreate a complete picture of what was happening.

The work is also based on the following methodological basis:

General scientific methods:

- *Analysis and synthesis* – made it possible to identify individual elements in the US foreign policy regarding the Syrian conflict, study them, and then combine them into a single whole and in the end get a big picture;

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. P. 105.

<sup>13</sup> See: *Haass R.* Foreign Policy Begins at Home: The Case for Putting America's House in Order. Basic Books, 2013. 192 p.; *Johnson R.* US Foreign Policy: Domestic Roots and International Impact. Bristol University Press, 2021. 288 p.

<sup>14</sup> See: *Cooley A.* US Domestic Politics and the Biden Administration's Global Agenda // Valdai Club. March 24, 2021. URL: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/us-domestic-politics-and-the-biden-administration-/> (accessed: 29.03.2023)

- *Deduction and induction* – helped to identify a number of common U.S. foreign policy features and characteristics and apply to the study of a particular problem under consideration, as well as to systematize disparate facts into common directions and trends in the development of U.S. Syrian policy;

Special methods of historical science:

- *Historical-genetic method* – as a method aimed at analyzing the development of the phenomenon under study, made it possible to trace the course of the formation and evolution of U.S. policy regarding the war in Syria, to identify the turning points of its formation, as well as the reasons why the U.S. approach changed in one direction or another;
- *Historical-comparative method* – was used to compare the Syrian policy of the three U.S. administrations, as well as to compare the U.S. policy in Syria with the policy towards other internal and international conflicts;
- *The problematic-chronological method* – was used to highlight certain structural elements that made up the U.S. policy in Syria, which were then studied in accordance with the timeline.

**The source base of the study** was made up of many different documents and materials that can be divided into several groups:

1. *International law*. This group included, first of all, the Charter of the United Nations<sup>15</sup>, as well as resolutions adopted by the UN General Assembly<sup>16</sup> and the UN Security Council<sup>17</sup>. Their study made it possible to determine a kind of framework by which, from a formal point of view, the United States was limited in the formation and implementation of its Syrian policy.

2. *International treaties and agreements*. This, the smallest group, includes only one source - the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between the USSR and Syria<sup>18</sup>, signed in 1980 and which is evidence of mutual obligations binding Russia as the legal successor of the Soviet Union and Syria.

3. *Documents of international organizations*. This group included reports on meetings of the UN Security Council<sup>19</sup>; reports prepared both by bodies belonging to the UN structure<sup>20</sup> and outside it, such

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<sup>15</sup> United Nations Charter // United Nations. URL: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text> (accessed: 18.02.2023)

<sup>16</sup> Strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian emergency assistance of the United Nations (A/RES/46/182). December 17, 1991. URL: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/RESOLUTION/GEN/NR0/582/70/img/NR058270.pdf> (accessed: 02.03.2023)

<sup>17</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254 (S/RES/2254). December 18, 2015. URL: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N15/443/34/PDF/N1544334.pdf> (accessed: 24.03.2023)

<sup>18</sup> Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the Syrian Arab Republic. October 8, 1980. (In Russ.). URL: <https://docs.cntd.ru/document/420354345> (accessed: 23.02.2023)

<sup>19</sup> 7922<sup>nd</sup> Meeting (S/PV.7922) // United Nations Security Council. April 12, 2017. URL: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/PRO/N17/098/58/pdf/N1709858.pdf> (accessed: 20.03.2023)

<sup>20</sup> Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (A/HRC/37/72). United Nations Human Right Council, Thirty-seventh session. February 1, 2018. URL: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G18/022/82/PDF/G1802282.pdf> (accessed: 04.04.2023)



as the World Bank<sup>21</sup>; internal documents of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, both open<sup>22</sup> and declassified and published by the WikiLeaks group<sup>23</sup>; draft unaccepted UN Security Council resolutions<sup>24</sup>; as well as publications of the UN press service<sup>25</sup>. These documents allow us to study the actions of the United States in relation to the Syrian conflict at the global level, to get an objective look at the Syrian policy of the United States of the international community, and also to get acquainted with the struggle of various positions on Syria that clashed during the work of the UN Security Council.

4. *Legislative documents.* This group included the US military budgets<sup>26</sup>, various US legislation<sup>27</sup>, including the unaccepted<sup>28</sup>, as well as transcripts of various hearings in the US Senate<sup>29</sup> and House of Representatives<sup>30</sup>. These papers shed light on the legislature of US policy towards Syria and also shed light on various debates between the executive and legislature over US Syria policy.

5. *Executive documents.* This group includes US National Security Strategies<sup>31</sup>, executive orders<sup>32</sup> and memorandums<sup>33</sup> of the US President, as well as his letters addressed to the leadership of the US Congress<sup>34</sup>. In addition, this includes the US State Department Reports on Terrorism<sup>35</sup> and Human

<sup>21</sup> The Toll of War: The Economic and Social Consequences of the Conflict in Syria // World Bank Group. July 10, 2017. 121 p. URL: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/publication/the-toll-of-war-the-economic-and-social-consequences-of-the-conflict-in-syria> (accessed: 22.01.2023)

<sup>22</sup> Decision: Scale of Assessments for 2019 // OPCW. November 20, 2018. URL:

<https://www.opcw.org/sites/default/files/documents/2018/11/c23dec14%28e%29.pdf> (accessed: 10.04.2020)

<sup>23</sup> OPCW Douma Docs // WikiLeaks. URL: <https://wikileaks.org/opcw-douma/releases/> (accessed: 10.04.2020)

<sup>24</sup> France, Germany, Portugal and United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland: draft resolution (S/2011/612). October 4, 2011. URL: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N11/531/31/PDF/N1153131.pdf> (accessed: 24.03.2023)

<sup>25</sup> Lift 'suffocating' unilateral sanctions against Syrians, urges UN human rights expert // UN News. November 10, 2022. URL: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/11/1130427> (accessed: 06.03.2023)

<sup>26</sup> H.R. 6523. Ike Skelton National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2011. December 2010. URL: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CPRT-111HPRT63160/pdf/CPRT-111HPRT63160.pdf> (accessed: 29.03.2023)

<sup>27</sup> H.R. 3364. Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act. August 2, 2017. URL:

<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-115publ44/pdf/PLAW-115publ44.pdf> (accessed: 20.03.2023)

<sup>28</sup> S. 856. Syria Stabilization Act of 2013. May 6, 2013. URL: <https://www.congress.gov/113/bills/s856/BILLS-113s856is.pdf> (accessed: 23.01.2023)

<sup>29</sup> Nomination of Hillary R. Clinton to Be Secretary of State // United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. January 13, 2009. URL: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-111shrg54615/pdf/CHRG-111shrg54615.pdf> (accessed: 17.01.2023)

<sup>30</sup> National Security Challenges and U.S. Military Activities in the Greater Middle East and North Africa // United States House of Representatives Committee on Armed Services. April 20, 2021. URL:

<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-117hrg47210/pdf/CHRG-117hrg47210.pdf> (accessed: 09.03.2023)

<sup>31</sup> National Security Strategy of the United States of America. December 2017. 56 p.

<sup>32</sup> Executive Order 13894 – Blocking Property and Suspending Entry of Certain Persons Contributing to the Situation in Syria. October 14, 2019. URL: <https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/126/13894.pdf> (accessed: 07.03.2023)

<sup>33</sup> Presidential Memorandum Plan to Defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria\* // The White House. January 28, 2017. URL: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/presidential-actions/presidential-memorandum-plan-defeat-islamic-state-iraq-syria/> (accessed: 26.02.2023) (with \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked)

<sup>34</sup> A Letter to the Speaker of the House and President pro tempore of the Senate Consistent with the War Powers Resolution // The White House. February 27, 2021. URL: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/02/27/a-letter-to-the-speaker-of-the-house-and-president-pro-tempore-of-the-senate-consistent-with-the-war-powers-resolution/> (accessed: 17.02.2023)

<sup>35</sup> Country Reports on Terrorism 2010 // U.S. Department of State. August, 2011. URL: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2010/170260.htm> (accessed: 22.01.2023)

Rights<sup>36</sup>, quarterly reports to Congress from the State Department's Leading Inspector General on the progress of Operation Inherent Resolve<sup>37</sup>, as well as various internal documents of the State Department<sup>38</sup>, the Pentagon<sup>39</sup> and the US Department of the Treasury<sup>40</sup>. All these documents record specific actions that the American leadership carried out as part of its Syrian policy, and also fixes its official position on certain issues.

6. *Statistics.* This group was mainly made up of the results of various public opinion polls conducted by the two main American centers on this issue – the Gallup Institute and the Pew Research Center. The work used surveys both specifically on the Syrian issue<sup>41</sup>, and large studies on US foreign policy in general<sup>42</sup>. These data help determine the attitude of the American population towards the issue under consideration, which, based on the theoretical approach we have adopted, is one of the significant domestic political variables that determine Washington's policy in Syria. In addition, public opinion polls in the Middle East were also used<sup>43</sup>, which helped determine the attitude of the local population towards American policy in the region.

7. *Public speeches of persons involved in the problem under study.* This, one of the largest groups of sources, included official statements by the President<sup>44</sup>, Secretary of State<sup>45</sup> or Secretary of Defense<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Syria 2021 Human Rights Report // U.S. Department of State. April 12, 2022. URL: [https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/313615\\_SYRIA-2021-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf](https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/313615_SYRIA-2021-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf) (accessed: 07.03.2023)

<sup>37</sup> Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve | Quarterly Report to the United States Congress | April 1, 2021 – June 30, 2021 // Office of Inspector General, U.S. Department of State. August 2021. URL: [https://www.stateoig.gov/uploads/report/report\\_pdf\\_file/oir\\_q3\\_jun21\\_gold\\_508.pdf](https://www.stateoig.gov/uploads/report/report_pdf_file/oir_q3_jun21_gold_508.pdf) (accessed: 09.03.2023)

<sup>38</sup> “So You’re An American?”: A Guide to Answering Difficult Questions Abroad // U.S. Department of State. URL: <https://www.state.gov/courses/answeringdifficultquestions/assets/m/resources/DifficultQuestions-AmericanValues.pdf> (accessed: 18.02.2023)

<sup>39</sup> Executive Summary: Independent Review of 18 March 2019 Civilian Casualty Incident in Baghuz, Syria // U.S. Department of Defense. May 17, 2022. URL: <https://media.defense.gov/2022/May/17/2002999192/-1/-1/1/EXECUTIVE-SUMMARY-INDEPENDENT-REVIEW-OF-18-MARCH-2019-CIVILIAN-CASUALTY-INCIDENT-IN-BAGHUZ-SYRIA.PDF> (accessed: 07.03.2023)

<sup>40</sup> Syria Sanctions Program // Office of Foreign Assets Control. August 2, 2013. URL: <https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/126/syria.pdf> (accessed: 22.01.2023)

<sup>41</sup> Americans divided over decision to withdraw from Syria // Pew Research Center. January 19, 2019. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/18/americans-divided-over-decision-to-withdraw-from-syria/> (accessed: 22.02.2023)

<sup>42</sup> Cyberterrorism Tops List of 11 Potential Threats to U.S. // Gallup. March 22, 2021. URL: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/339974/cyberterrorism-tops-list-potential-threats.aspx> (accessed: 22.02.2023)

<sup>43</sup> Democracy in the Middle East & North Africa // Arab Barometer. July 2022. URL: [https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABVII\\_Governance\\_Report-EN-1.pdf](https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABVII_Governance_Report-EN-1.pdf) (accessed: 18.02.2023)

<sup>44</sup> Statement by President Obama on the Situation in Syria // The White House. August 18, 2011. URL: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/08/18/statement-president-obama-situation-syria> (accessed: 08.07.2022)

<sup>45</sup> U.S. Announces Additional Humanitarian Assistance for the Syria Crisis Response // U.S. Department of State. May 10, 2022. URL: <https://www.state.gov/u-s-announces-additional-humanitarian-assistance-for-the-syria-crisis-response-2/> (accessed: 02.03.2023)

<sup>46</sup> Carter: Combat Training Begins for New Syrian Forces // U.S. Department of Defense. May 7, 2015. URL: <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/604596/carter-combat-training-begins-for-new-syrian-forces/> (accessed: 06.05.2018)

of the United States; press releases issued by the White House<sup>47</sup>, the State Department<sup>48</sup>, the Pentagon<sup>49</sup>, or the Department of the Treasury<sup>50</sup>; press conferences and briefings hosted by the White House<sup>51</sup>, the State Department<sup>52</sup> and the Pentagon<sup>53</sup>; remarks by US official representatives at the UN<sup>54</sup>; joint statements made by various US executives along with their foreign counterparts<sup>55</sup>. In addition, some articles released by US officials to the media<sup>56</sup>, as well as transcripts of election debates<sup>57</sup>, have also been included. Like documents of the executive branch, these materials record individual steps and measures taken by Washington in relation to Syria and its allies and reflect the official position of the United States. Finally, the study also used public speeches by Russian officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs<sup>58</sup>, the Ministry of Defense<sup>59</sup> and the Foreign Intelligence Service<sup>60</sup> of the Russian Federation, reflecting Moscow's reaction to US policy in Syria.

8. *Memoirs*. As the name of this category implies, it includes the memoirs of American politicians who took part in the formation and implementation of the US Syrian policy – Secretaries of State<sup>61</sup>,

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<sup>47</sup> Fact Sheet: Strategy to Counter the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)\* // The White House. September 10, 2014. URL: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/fact-sheet-strategy-counter-islamic-state-iraq-and-levant-isil> (accessed: 29.04.2018) (with \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked)

<sup>48</sup> Violence in Northern Syria, Northern Iraq, and Southern Türkiye // U.S. Department of State. November 21, 2022. URL: <https://www.state.gov/violence-in-northern-syria-northern-iraq-and-southern-turkey/> (accessed: 11.03.2023)

<sup>49</sup> Pentagon Announces Troop Levels in Iraq, Syria // U.S. Department of Defense. December 7, 2017. URL: <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/1390079/pentagon-announces-troop-levels-in-iraq-syria/> (accessed: 04.05.2020)

<sup>50</sup> Treasury Sanctions Syrian, Iranian Security Forces for Involvement in Syrian Crackdown // U.S. Department of the Treasury. June 29, 2011. URL: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/tg1224> (accessed: 22.01.2023)

<sup>51</sup> Press Conference by the President // The White House. October 2, 2015. URL: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/10/02/press-conference-president> (accessed: 07.05.2018)

<sup>52</sup> Briefing with a Senior Administration Official // U.S. Department of State. June 16, 2021. URL: <https://www.state.gov/briefing-with-a-senior-state-administration-official/> (accessed: 02.03.2023)

<sup>53</sup> Department of Defense Press Briefing by Pentagon Chief Spokesperson Dana W. White in the Pentagon Briefing Room // U.S. Department of Defense. February 8, 2018. URL: <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/1436566/department-of-defense-press-briefing-by-pentagon-chief-spokesperson-dana-w-whit/> (accessed: 25.03.2020)

<sup>54</sup> Amb Haley on Syria Assuming the Presidency of the Conference on Disarmament // U.S. Embassy in Syria. May 29, 2018. URL: <https://sy.usembassy.gov/amb-haley-on-syria-assuming-the-presidency-of-the-conference-on-disarmament/> (accessed: 10.04.2020)

<sup>55</sup> Joint Statement Issued by Partners at the Counter-ISIL\* Coalition Ministerial Meeting // U.S. Department of State. December 3, 2014. URL: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/12/234627.htm> (accessed: 05.05.2018)

<sup>56</sup> *Biden J.* Why I Chose Lloyd Austin as Secretary of Defense // The Atlantic. December 8, 2020. URL: <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/12/secretary-defense/617330/> (accessed: 08.02.2023)

<sup>57</sup> Presidential debate transcript, Oct. 7, 2008 // NBC News. October 8, 2008. URL: <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna27073997> (accessed: 16.01.2023)

<sup>58</sup> Explanation of vote by Chargé d'Affaires of the Russian Federation Dmitry Polyanskiy after UNSC vote on a draft resolution on renewal of the cross-border humanitarian mechanism for Syria proposed by Ireland and Norway // Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations. July 8, 2022. URL: <https://russiaun.ru/en/news/080722p> (accessed: 04.04.2023)

<sup>59</sup> Statement of the Joint Coordination Headquarters of Russia and Syria on the problems of the return of Syrian refugees and internally displaced persons in the context of the spread of coronavirus infection // Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation. March 1, 2021. URL: [https://eng.mil.ru/en/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=12346644@egNews](https://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12346644@egNews) (accessed: 04.04.2023)

<sup>60</sup> About the interaction of the United States with terrorist groups (In Russ.) // Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation. May 17, 2022. URL: <http://www.svr.gov.ru/smi/2022/05/o-vzaimodeystvii-ssha-s-terroristicheskimi-gruppirovkami.htm> (accessed: 09.03.2023)

<sup>61</sup> *Clinton H.* Hard Choices. Simon & Shuster, 2014. 925 p.

Secretaries of Defense<sup>62</sup> and National Security Advisors<sup>63</sup>, as well as memoirs of the 43rd and 44th US Presidents – George W. Bush<sup>64</sup> and Barack Obama<sup>65</sup>. These sources, on the one hand, help to find out a number of details that are not reflected in official documents or public statements made during the service, but on the other hand, they are highly susceptible to self-censorship, designed to hide their own failures and shift responsibility to management or subordinates, as well as retroactively put yourself in the best light.

9. *Media materials*. The last, most numerous group of sources includes articles and materials published in various media and news agencies in the United States, Russia and some other states. From the American media, this work used materials from such publications as Foreign Affairs<sup>66</sup>, Foreign Policy<sup>67</sup>, Politico<sup>68</sup>, Time<sup>69</sup>, The New York Times<sup>70</sup>, The Washington Post<sup>71</sup>, The Wall Street Journal<sup>72</sup>, Bloomberg<sup>73</sup>, Los Angeles Times<sup>74</sup>, The Atlantic<sup>75</sup>, The New Yorker<sup>76</sup>, VOX<sup>77</sup>, USA

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<sup>62</sup> Panetta L. *Worthy Fights*. New York: Penguin Press, 2014. 544 p.

<sup>63</sup> Bolton J. *The Room Where It Happened*. Simon & Shuster, 2020. 592 p.

<sup>64</sup> Bush G.W. *Decision Points*. New York: Crown Publishers. 2010. 497 p.

<sup>65</sup> Obama B. *Promised Land*. New York: Crown, 2020. 768 p.

<sup>66</sup> Lund A. Syria's Fair-weather Friends // Foreign Affairs. October 31, 2017. URL:

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-10-31/syrias-fair-weather-friends> (accessed: 13.07.2022)

<sup>67</sup> Hudson J. Congress Approves Arming of Syrian Rebels // Foreign Policy. September 18, 2014. URL:

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/09/18/congress-approves-arming-of-syrian-rebels/> (accessed: 26.01.2023)

<sup>68</sup> Wright A., Ewing P. Carter's unwelcome news: Only 60 Syrian rebels fit for training // Politico. July 7, 2015. URL:

<https://www.politico.com/story/2015/07/ash-carter-syrian-rebel-training-119812> (accessed: 06.05.2018)

<sup>69</sup> Thompson M. No Can Do: The Pentagon Explains Why It Can't Save a Syrian Town // Time. October 8, 2014. URL:

<http://time.com/3482713/pentagon-kobani-syria-turkey/> (accessed: 02.05.2018)

<sup>70</sup> Mazzetti M., Gordon M., Landler M. U.S. Is Said to Plan to Send Weapons to Syrian Rebels // The New York Times. June

13, 2013. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/14/world/middleeast/syria-chemical-weapons.html> (accessed:

23.01.2023)

<sup>71</sup> Abramowitz M. Does the United States have a 'responsibility to protect' the Syrian people? // The Washington Post.

September 6, 2013. URL: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/does-the-united-states-have-a-responsibility-to-protect-the-syrian-people/2013/09/06/5decf4c0-167d-11e3-be6e-dc6ae8a5b3a8\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/does-the-united-states-have-a-responsibility-to-protect-the-syrian-people/2013/09/06/5decf4c0-167d-11e3-be6e-dc6ae8a5b3a8_story.html) (accessed: 17.02.2023)

<sup>72</sup> Entous A., Barnes J., Gorman S. U.S. Begins Shipping Arms for Syrian Rebels // The Wall Street Journal. June 26, 2013.

URL: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323419604578569830070537040> (accessed: 21.04.2018)

<sup>73</sup> Riley M. Ryan Doesn't Rule Out Troops in Syria to Fight Islamic State\* // Bloomberg. February 5, 2017. URL:

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-02-05/ryan-doesn-t-rule-out-troops-in-syria-to-fight-islamic-state>

(accessed: 03.05.2020) (with \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked)

<sup>74</sup> Cloud D., Abdulrahim R. U.S. has secretly provided arms training to Syria rebels since 2012 // Los Angeles Times. June

21, 2013. URL: <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/jun/21/world/la-fg-cia-syria-20130622> (accessed: 21.04.2018)

<sup>75</sup> Kenner D. No Matter Who Wins the Syrian Civil War, Israel Loses // The Atlantic. August 29, 2018. URL:

<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/08/israel-gamble-assad-syria/568693/> (accessed: 26.02.2023)

<sup>76</sup> Glasser S. "It Won't End Well": Trump and His Obscure New National-Security Chief // The New Yorker. September 19,

2019. URL: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/letter-from-trumps-washington/it-wont-end-well-trump-and-his-obscure-new-national-security-chief> (accessed: 12.02.2023)

<sup>77</sup> Ku J. Trump's Syria strike clearly broke international law – and no one seems to care // VOX. April 19, 2017. URL:

<https://www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2017/4/19/15345686/syria-un-strike-illegal-un-humanitarian-law> (accessed: 17.02.2023)

Today<sup>78</sup>, The National Interest<sup>79</sup>, The American Conservative<sup>80</sup>, The Spectator<sup>81</sup>, Slate<sup>82</sup>, Washingtonian<sup>83</sup>, Business Insider<sup>84</sup>, The National Review<sup>85</sup>, and CNN<sup>86</sup>, MSNBC<sup>87</sup>, CBS<sup>88</sup>, NBC<sup>89</sup> and ABC<sup>90</sup> channels. Among other foreign publications, it is worth highlighting the British The Guardian<sup>91</sup>, Financial Times<sup>92</sup> and the Reuters news agency<sup>93</sup>, the Qatari Al Jazeera<sup>94</sup>, the Israeli The Times of Israel<sup>95</sup> and the Jerusalem Post<sup>96</sup>, the Turkish TRT<sup>97</sup>, as well as specialized on the Middle East

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<sup>78</sup> Huang M. US-led coalition airstrikes destroyed Raqqa. I met the women we've abandoned there // USA Today. June 5, 2019. URL: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/voices/2019/06/05/war-syria-us-coalition-raqqa-civilians-column/1329185001/> (accessed: 24.04.2020)

<sup>79</sup> Cohen A. Russia Is Back // The National Interest. September 17, 2013. URL: <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/russia-back-9077> (accessed: 20.01.2023)

<sup>80</sup> Porter G. How America Armed Terrorists in Syria // The American Conservative. June 22, 2017. URL: <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/how-america-armed-terrorists-in-syria/> (accessed: 06.05.2018)

<sup>81</sup> Hadar L. Joe Biden, foreign policy realist // The Spectator. December 20, 2021. URL: <https://thespectator.com/topic/time-for-joe-biden-foreign-policy-realist/> (accessed: 10.02.2023)

<sup>82</sup> Kaplan F. Biden's Team of Allies // Slate. November 23, 2020. URL: <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2020/11/biden-blinken-sullivan-flournoy-haines.html> (accessed: 08.02.2023)

<sup>83</sup> Harris S. Why Michael Morell Won't Replace Petraeus As Director of the CIA // Washingtonian. November 13, 2012. URL: <https://www.washingtonian.com/2012/11/13/why-michael-morell-wont-replace-petraeus-as-director-of-the-cia/> (accessed: 18.01.2023)

<sup>84</sup> Lockie A. Trump's new national security adviser is hawkish on Russia – a big reversal from Michael Flynn // Insider. February 21, 2017. URL: <https://www.businessinsider.com/mcmaster-reversal-michael-flynn-national-security-council-russia-hawk-2017-2> (accessed: 11.02.2023)

<sup>85</sup> Bolton J. What to Do about Syria? // The National Review. June 11, 2012. URL: <https://www.nationalreview.com/2012/06/what-do-about-syria-john-r-bolton/> (accessed: 11.02.2023)

<sup>86</sup> Obama authorizes resupply of Syrian opposition // CNN. October 5, 2015. URL: <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/10/05/politics/russia-ground-campaign-syria-isis/> (accessed: 07.05.2018)

<sup>87</sup> On Syrian oil, Trump says US 'should be able to take some' // MSNBC. October 28, 2019. URL: <http://www.msnbc.com/rachel-maddow-show/syrian-oil-trump-says-us-should-be-able-to-take-some> (accessed: 06.05.2020)

<sup>88</sup> Syria: Sean Spicer says U.S. must accept «political reality» // CBS News. March 31, 2017. URL: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/syria-sean-spicer-says-u-s-must-accept-political-reality/> (accessed: 30.04.2020)

<sup>89</sup> Inside the Syrian refugee camp where supplies are low and ISIS\* fears run high // NBC News. November 23, 2022. URL: <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/syrian-refugee-camp-supplies-are-low-isis-fears-run-high-rcna58288> (accessed: 07.03.2023) (with \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked)

<sup>90</sup> President Trump: I 'Absolutely' Will Put Safe Zones in Syria // ABC News. January 26, 2017. URL: <https://abcnews.go.com/International/president-trump-absolutely-put-safe-zones-syria/story?id=45062805> (accessed: 01.04.2020)

<sup>91</sup> Letsch C. US drops weapons and ammunition to help Kurdish fighters in Kobani // The Guardian. October 20, 2014. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/20/turkey-iraqi-kurds-kobani-isis-fighters-us-air-drops-arms> (accessed: 06.12.2020)

<sup>92</sup> England A. Iran's foreign minister holds 'friendly talks' with Saudi Arabia // Financial Times. December 21, 2022. URL: <https://www.ft.com/content/beff5178-f8c7-4172-b121-f4d6356f7d16> (accessed: 09.03.2023)

<sup>93</sup> Biden says 'no doubt' Syrian government used chemical weapons // Reuters. August 28, 2013. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-syria-crisis-biden-idUKBRE97Q13R20130827> (accessed: 10.02.2023)

<sup>94</sup> Ayton M. 'Times have changed': Saudi Arabia-Syria in rapprochement talks // Al Jazeera. June 8, 2021. URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/8/times-have-changed-saudi-syria-in-rapprochement-talks> (accessed: 03.03.2023)

<sup>95</sup> Gavlak D., Halaby J. Arms shipments to Syrian rebels on the rise // The Times of Israel. March 27, 2013. URL: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/arms-shipments-to-syrian-rebels-on-the-rise/> (accessed: 25.01.2023)

<sup>96</sup> Harkov L. Most Israelis think Biden is worse for Israel than Trump was – poll // The Jerusalem Post. October 20, 2021. URL: <https://www.jpost.com/american-politics/most-israelis-think-biden-is-worse-for-israel-than-trump-was-poll-682518> (accessed: 09.03.2023)

<sup>97</sup> Erdogan: US move to lift sanctions on YPG/PKK-controlled areas unacceptable // TRT World. May 13, 2022. URL: <https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/erdogan-us-move-to-lift-sanctions-on-ypg-pkk-controlled-areas-unacceptable-57113> (accessed: 06.03.2023)

issues web-sites Al-Monitor<sup>98</sup> and Middle East Eye<sup>99</sup>. Of the Russian media, it is worth highlighting the news agencies RIA Novosti<sup>100</sup> and TASS<sup>101</sup>, as well as the publications Rossiyskaya Gazeta<sup>102</sup>, RT in Russian<sup>103</sup>, Izvestia<sup>104</sup>, Kommersant<sup>105</sup>, Nezavisimaya Gazeta<sup>106</sup> and Lenta.ru<sup>107</sup>.

The advantages of this group of sources lie in the presence in them of certain "insider" information that would otherwise be inaccessible to us – for example, the public first learned about the existence of the secret CIA program for arming the Syrian rebels called Timber Sycamore precisely from the investigations of American journalists. However, on the other hand, it should be remembered that articles in the media are often very biased, depending on the political views of the leadership of the country in which the publication is based, and its direct owners, while insiders, for all their apparent usefulness and indispensability, in fact, may turn out to be speculation and the so-called “fake news”. Given the high degree of secrecy around American actions regarding the war in Syria, and at the same time, the exorbitant level of politicization of the Syrian conflict and its media coverage, both of these features are worth bearing in mind.

**The degree of scientific development of the topic** is twofold. On the one hand, given the geopolitical significance of the war in Syria, we have a huge amount of scientific and analytical work of all types, in one way or another affecting the processes taking place around the Syrian conflict, the conflict itself, as well as American participation in it. On the other hand, major works devoted directly to the US policy towards the Syrian conflict throughout its entire length have not yet appeared.

In general, the literature that deals more or less with American involvement in the Syrian conflict can be divided into four categories. The first category includes literature on *US foreign policy in general*, its

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<sup>98</sup> Souleiman D. Russian, US troops in Syria share 'rare moment' of congeniality // Al-Monitor. October 10, 2022. URL: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/10/russian-us-troops-syria-share-rare-moment-congeniality> (accessed: 09.03.2023)

<sup>99</sup> Mathews S. Sending gas to Lebanon via Syria unlikely to violate sanctions: US official // Middle East Eye. October 18, 2022. URL: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/sending-gas-lebanon-syria-unlikely-to-violate-sanctions-senior-us-official-says> (accessed: 03.03.2023)

<sup>100</sup> US general: US should be part of Syria talks (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. January 25, 2017. URL: <https://ria.ru/20170125/1486411396.html> (accessed: 21.03.2020)

<sup>101</sup> The General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces: the United States is preparing terrorists at the Al-Tanf base in Syria (In Russ.) // TASS. December 27, 2017. URL: <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/4845692> (accessed: 19.04.2020)

<sup>102</sup> UN develops 12 steps for political reform in Syria (In Russ.) // Rossiyskaya gazeta. March 24, 2016. URL: <https://rg.ru/2016/03/24/oon-razrabotala-12-punktov-politicheskoy-reformy-v-sirii.html> (accessed: 17.07.2022)

<sup>103</sup> “A historical mistake”: the US Congress criticized Trump's decision to withdraw from the nuclear deal with Iran (In Russ.) // RT in Russian. May 9, 2018. URL: <https://russian.rt.com/world/article/510993-kongress-ssha-kritika-tramp-sdelka-iran> (accessed: 02.03.2020)

<sup>104</sup> Loginova K. The strategy is unchanged: the Americans are again strengthening in Syria (In Russ.) // Izvestiya. November 11, 2022. URL: <https://iz.ru/1423706/kseniia-loginova/strategiia-neizmenna-amerikantcy-vnov-usilivaiutsia-v-sirii> (accessed: 12.03.2023)

<sup>105</sup> Reutov A. Sanctions without consequences (In Russ.) // Kommersant. May 13, 2004. URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/473864> (accessed: 22.01.2023)

<sup>106</sup> Subbotin I. Americans are not on the way with the Arab gas pipeline (In Russ.) // Nezavisimaya gazeta. June 1, 2022. URL: [https://www.ng.ru/world/2022-06-01/6\\_8450\\_sanctions.html](https://www.ng.ru/world/2022-06-01/6_8450_sanctions.html) (accessed: 03.03.2023)

<sup>107</sup> The United States began to form an Arab special force in Syria (In Russ.) // Lenta.ru. April 29, 2020. URL: <https://lenta.ru/news/2020/04/29/usaprivlekaytv-sirii/> (accessed: 06.05.2020)

past, present and future. Among the works of Russian researchers, we can single out the works of Vladimir I. Batyuk<sup>108</sup>, Alexander P. Baryshev<sup>109</sup>, Natalya I. Bubnova<sup>110</sup>, Alexander I. Kubyshev<sup>111</sup>, Natalya A. Tsvetkova<sup>111</sup>, Mikhail V. Bratersky<sup>112</sup>, Sergey M. Samuylov<sup>113</sup>, Ivan N. Timofeev<sup>114</sup>, Alexey A. Popov<sup>115</sup>. Among foreign researchers, the works of J. Jakobsen<sup>116</sup>, A. Mintz, K. Wayne<sup>117</sup>, M. Sisson, J. Sibens, B. Blechman<sup>118</sup>, F. Harvey, J. Mitton<sup>119</sup>, P. Macdonald<sup>120</sup>, S. Talmon<sup>121</sup> and others can be noted.

In the second category, we can include works that examine *US policy in the Middle East and North Africa*. The most significant here are the works of Mikhail V. Bratersky<sup>122</sup>, Andrey A. Sushentsov<sup>123</sup>, Alexander I. Shumilin<sup>124</sup>, Denis V. Golubev<sup>125</sup>, D. Henriksen, A. Larssen<sup>126</sup>, S. Litsas<sup>127</sup>,

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<sup>108</sup> *Batyuk V.* Conflicts of low intensity in the American military-political strategy at the beginning of the 21st century. (In Russ.). Moscow: Ves Mir Publishing House, 2018. 192 p.

<sup>109</sup> *Baryshev A.* Modern strategy of the USA and NATO (in the context of Russian national security problems). (In Russ.). Moscow: OGI, 2011. 248 p.

<sup>110</sup> *Bubnova N.* Military-political course of the USA in the second decade of the 21st century. (In Russ.). Moscow: Political encyclopedia, 2021. 621 p.

<sup>111</sup> *Kubyshev A., Tsvetkova N.* The US Public Diplomacy. (In Russ.). Moscow: Aspect Press, 2013. 271 p.

<sup>112</sup> *Bratersky M.* American and Russian approaches to the problem of peacekeeping (In Russ.) // USA & Canada: Economics, Politics, Culture. 2017, №2. P. 39-51.

<sup>113</sup> *Samuylov S.* Donald Trump's Foreign Policy: Campaign Promises, Contradictory Steps, Threat of Impeachment (In Russ.) // USA & Canada: Economics, Politics, Culture. 2017. №8. P. 27-44.

<sup>114</sup> *Timofeev I.* "Sanctions for Sanctions Violation": U.S. Department of Treasury Enforcement Actions against Financial Sector (In Russ.) // Polis. Political Studies. 2020. No. 6. P. 73-90. DOI: 10.17976/jpps/2020.06.06

<sup>115</sup> *Popov A.* Second administration of Barack Obama (In Russ.) // USA & Canada: Economics, Politics, Culture. 2013, №6. P. 17-40.

<sup>116</sup> *Jakobsen J.* The Geopolitics of U.S. Overseas Troops and Withdrawal. Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2022. 323 p. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-030-94488-9

<sup>117</sup> *Mintz A., Wayne C.* The Polythink Syndrome: U.S. Foreign Policy Decisions On 9/11, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Syria and ISIS\*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016. 190 p. (with \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked)

<sup>118</sup> *Sisson M., Sibens J., Blechman B. (eds.).* Military Coercion and US Foreign Policy. Routledge, 2020. 230 p.

<sup>119</sup> *Harvey F., Mitton J.* Fighting for Credibility: US Reputation and International Politics. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017. 312 p.

<sup>120</sup> *Macdonald P.* America First? Explaining Continuity and Change in Trump's Foreign Policy // Political Science Quarterly. 2018. Vol. 133, No. 3. P. 401-434. DOI :10.1002/polq.12804

<sup>121</sup> *Talmon S.* The United States under President Trump: Gravedigger of International Law // Chinese Journal of International Law. 2019, Vol. 17. P. 645-668. DOI: 10.1093/chinesejil/jmz023

<sup>122</sup> *Bratersky M.* The USA and the troubled countries of Asia: justification, development and implementation of policy in 1990-2005. (In Russ.). Moscow: MONF, 2005. 240 p.

<sup>123</sup> *Sushentsov A.* Essays on US Policy in Regional Conflicts in the 2000s. (In Russ.). Moscow: MGIMO-University Publishing House, 2013. 249 p.

<sup>124</sup> *Shumilin A.* The Evolution of US Approaches to Conflicts in the Middle East (In Russ.) // USA & Canada: Economics, Politics, Culture. 2017, №1. P. 32-53.

<sup>125</sup> *Golubev D.* Order, Chaos, and the Clash of Systemic Powers: Key Dilemmas of US Policy in the Middle East (In Russ.) // *Shiryaev B., Leksyutina Ya., Bogdanov A. [eds.].* Challenges and Dilemmas of US Foreign Policy at the Beginning of the 21st Century: Regional Aspects. St Petersburg: Skifiya-print, 2014. 220 p.

<sup>126</sup> *Henriksen D., Larssen A.K. (eds.).* Political Rationale and International Consequences of the War in Libya. Oxford, 2016. 336 p. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198767480.003.0014>

<sup>127</sup> *Litsas S.* US Foreign Policy in the Eastern Mediterranean. Springer, 2020. 221 p. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-030-36895-1

D. Starr-Deelen<sup>128</sup>, D. Tripathi<sup>129</sup>, K. Barzegar<sup>130</sup>, J. Davidson<sup>131</sup>, M. Lynch<sup>132</sup>, D. Sun<sup>133</sup> and P. Terry<sup>134</sup>.

The third, more numerous group of works covers *the history of Syria and the Syrian conflict* in general, as well as its various sides and aspects. Here we can highlight the works of such authors as Vladimir M. Akhmedov<sup>135</sup>, M. Weiss, H. Hassan<sup>136</sup>, Boris V. Dolgov<sup>137</sup>, S. Kleib<sup>138</sup>, Igor A. Matveev<sup>139</sup>, Vitaly V. Naumkin<sup>140</sup>, Elsa P. Pir-Budagova<sup>141</sup>, Ekaterina A. Stepanova<sup>142</sup>, Yury B. Shcheglovina<sup>143</sup>, Leonid M. Isaev, Andrey V. Korotaev, Anton G. Mardasov<sup>144</sup>, Alexander A. Kuznetsov<sup>145</sup>, Andrey E. Yashlavsky<sup>146</sup>, R. Abhyankar<sup>147</sup>, A. Borshchevskaya<sup>148</sup>, B. Cole<sup>149</sup>, S.

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<sup>128</sup> Starr-Deelen D.G. Counter-Terrorism from the Obama Administration to President Trump. Palgrave Pivot Cham, 2018. 77 p. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-69757-4

<sup>129</sup> Tripathi D. Afghanistan and the Vietnam Syndrome. London: Springer. 2023. 173 p. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-031-23555-9

<sup>130</sup> Barzegar K. A Turning Point in the Middle East Geopolitics // Russia in Global Affairs. 2012, No. 2. URL: <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/a-turning-point-in-the-middle-east-geopolitics/> (accessed: 23.02.2023)

<sup>131</sup> Davidson J.W. France, Britain and the intervention in Libya: an integrated analysis // Cambridge Review of International Affairs. 2013, Vol. 26, No. 2. P. 310-329. DOI: 10.1080/09557571.2013.784573

<sup>132</sup> Lynch M. Belligerent Minimalism: The Trump Administration and the Middle East // The Washington Quarterly. 2016, Vol. 39, No.4. P. 127-144. DOI: 10.1080/0163660X.2016.1263920

<sup>133</sup> Sun D. The US Military Bases in the Gulf Cooperation Council States: Dynamics of Readjustment // Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia). 2010, Vol. 4, No. 4. P. 44-63. DOI: 10.1080/19370679.2010.12023167

<sup>134</sup> Terry P. The Libya intervention (2011): neither lawful, nor successful // The Comparative and International Law Journal of Southern Africa. 2015, Vol. 48, No. 2. P. 162-182

<sup>135</sup> Akhmedov V. The Syrian Crisis and Iran's Struggle for the Middle East (1990–2020s). (In Russ.) Moscow: Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 2022. 272 p.

<sup>136</sup> Weiss M., Hassan H. ISIS\*: Inside the Army of Terror. (In Russ.). Moscow: Alpina non-fiction, 2016. 346 p. (with \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked)

<sup>137</sup> E.g., Dolgov B. Syrian Confrontation: Internal and External Factors (2011-2021). (In Russ.) Moscow: LENAND, 2021. 208 p.

<sup>138</sup> Kleib S. The destruction of Syria or the departure of Assad? (In Russ.) Moscow: Biblos consulting, 2018. 456 p.

<sup>139</sup> Matveev I. Syria in conflict. (In Russ.) Moscow: Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 2020. 496 p.

<sup>140</sup> Naumkin V. Islamic Radicalism and Outside Intervention in Deeply Divided Societies in the Middle East (In Russ.) / Naumkin V., Malysheva D. Conflicts and Wars of the 21st Century (Middle East and North Africa). Moscow: Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 2015. 504 p.

<sup>141</sup> Pir-Budagova E. The history of Syria. 20<sup>th</sup> Century. (In Russ.) Moscow: Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 2015. 392 p.

<sup>142</sup> Stepanova E. ISIS\* and the Foreign Terrorist Fighter Phenomenon in Syria and Iraq. (In Russ.) Moscow: Institute of World Economy and International Relations of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 2020. 198 p. DOI: 10.20542/978-5-9535-0583-3

<sup>143</sup> Shcheglovina Yu. Thoughts on the Syrian conflict. (In Russ.) Moscow: Middle East Institute, 2018. 218 p.

<sup>144</sup> Isaev L., Korotaev A., Mardasov A. Metamorphoses of the intra-Syrian negotiation process (In Russ.) // World Economy and International Relations. 2018. №3. P. 20-28.

<sup>145</sup> Kuznetsov A. On the impact of Shiite-Sunni contradictions on the situation in the Middle East (In Russ.) // Bulletin of MGIMO-University. 2014, №3. P. 146-155.

<sup>146</sup> Yashlavsky A. Extremist Groups in the Syrian Civil War: New Players and New Threats (In Russ.) // World Economy and International Relations. 2014, №10. P. 93-104. DOI: 10.20542/0131-2227-2014-10-93-104

<sup>147</sup> Abhyankar R.M. Syria: The Tragedy of a Pivotal State. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. 341 p. DOI: 10.1007/978-981-15-4562-7

<sup>148</sup> Borshchevskaya A. Putin's War in Syria: Russian Foreign Policy and the Price of America's Absence. London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2021. 246 p.

<sup>149</sup> Cole B. The Syrian Information and Propaganda War. Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. 414 p. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-030-93282-4



Dagher<sup>150</sup>, H. Harris<sup>151</sup>, D. Khatib<sup>152</sup>, C. Lister<sup>153</sup>, L. Matar, A. Kadri<sup>154</sup>, C. Phillips<sup>155</sup>, B. Scheller<sup>156</sup>, G. Hughes<sup>157</sup>, A. Podraza<sup>158</sup>, M. Sosnowski<sup>159</sup>, P. Tank<sup>160</sup>. It is also worth noting a number of candidate dissertations on the Syrian conflict, authored by Ganem Somar<sup>161</sup> and Anton A. Kharlamov<sup>162</sup> and the doctoral dissertation of Maria S. Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva<sup>163</sup>.

Finally, the fourth category of works is directly devoted to *various aspects of the US involvement in the Syrian conflict*. These include the works of Igor I. Abylgaziev, Veronika Yu. Krasheninnikova, Andrey V. Manoilo, Vladimir A. Isaev, Konstantin S. Strigunov<sup>164</sup>, Andrey D. Tsyganok<sup>165</sup>, Vladimir I. Batyuk<sup>166</sup>, Andrey S. Evseenko<sup>167</sup>, Maxim A. Suchkov<sup>168</sup>, Sergey M. Samuilov, Marina M.

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<sup>150</sup> Dagher S. *Assad or We Burn the Country: How One Family's Lust for Power Destroyed Syria*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2019. 592 p.

<sup>151</sup> Harris H. *Quicksilver War: Syria, Iraq and the Spiral of Conflict*. Oxford University Press, 2018. 230 p.

<sup>152</sup> Khatib D.K. (ed.). *The Syrian Crisis: Effects on the Regional and International Relations*. Springer, 2020. 242 p. DOI: 10.1007/978-981-15-5050-8

<sup>153</sup> Lister C. *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda\*, the Islamic State\* and the Evolution of an Insurgency*. Oxford University Press, 2015. 500 p. (with \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked)

<sup>154</sup> Matar L., Kadri A. (eds.). *Syria: From National Independence to Proxy War*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. 296 p. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-98458-2

<sup>155</sup> Phillips C. *The Battle For Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016. 303 p. DOI: 10.12987/9780300262032

<sup>156</sup> Scheller B. *The Wisdom of Syria's Waiting Game: Foreign Policy Under the Assads*. London: Hurst & Company, 2013. 268 p.

<sup>157</sup> Hughes G.A. Syria and the perils of proxy warfare // *Small Wars & Insurgencies*. 2014, Vol. 25, No. 3. P. 522-538. DOI: 10.1080/09592318.2014.913542

<sup>158</sup> Podraza A. Geopolitical and Strategic Causes and Implications of the Syrian Civil War and the Refugee Crisis // *Nação e Defesa*. 2018, No. 149. P. 66-87.

<sup>159</sup> Sosnowski M. Negotiating statehood through ceasefires: Syria's de-escalation zones // *Small Wars & Insurgencies*. 2020, Vol. 31, No. 7-8. P. 1395-1414. DOI: 10.1080/09592318.2020.1829872

<sup>160</sup> Tank P. Between Human and State Security: Turkey's Syria Policy under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) // *The International Spectator*. 2021, Vol. 56, No. 4. P. 84-100. DOI: 10.1080/03932729.2021.1984065

<sup>161</sup> Somar G. Syrian conflict in the context of regional international relations in the Middle East (2011-2021). (In Russ.). Dissertation submitted for the degree of Candidate of Historical Sciences. Moscow, 2021. 197 p.

<sup>162</sup> Kharlamov A. "Arab spring" in Egypt, Libya, Syria and its implications for global and regional security. (In Russ.). Dissertation submitted for the degree of Candidate of Political Sciences. Nizhny Novgorod, 2016. 205 p.

<sup>163</sup> Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva M. The Syrian Crisis in the Transforming System of International Relations. (In Russ.). Dissertation submitted for the degree of Doctor of Historical Sciences. Moscow, 2018. 1047 p.

<sup>164</sup> Abylgaziev I., Krasheninnikova V., Manoilo A., Isaev D., Strigunov K. US war for "peace" in Syria. (In Russ.). Moscow: Institute of Foreign Policy Studies and Initiatives, 2021. 96 p.

<sup>165</sup> Tsyganok A. US and NATO intervention in Libya and its consequences for Syria, Iran, the Caucasus: a Russian perspective. (In Russ.). Moscow: AIRO-XXI, 2016. 448 p.

<sup>166</sup> Batyuk V. USA vs. ISIS\* (In Russ.) // *USA & Canada: Economics, Politics, Culture*. 2016, №6. P. 3-19.

<sup>167</sup> Evseenko A. US and Kurds: Relationships during the Syrian Civil War (In Russ.) // *Russia and America in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. 2019, Special Issue. URL: <https://rusus.jes.su/s207054760005315-3-1> (accessed: 05.03.2020)

<sup>168</sup> Suchkov M. The problem of settlement in Syria in relations between Russia and the United States (In Russ.) / *Shakleina T. [ed.]*. *Russia and the USA in the XXI century. Relationship features*. Moscow; Aspect-press Publishing House, 2020. 352 p.

Panyuzheva<sup>169</sup>, Alexander I. Shumilin<sup>170</sup>, J. Ghani<sup>171</sup>, S. Gowans<sup>172</sup>, J. Warrick<sup>173</sup>, S. Burns, A. Stravers<sup>174</sup>, P. Cragin<sup>175</sup>, F. Manfredi Firmian<sup>176</sup>, H. Mouritzen<sup>177</sup>, D. Murray<sup>178</sup>, H. Notte<sup>179</sup>, A. Paphiti, S.-D. Bachmann<sup>180</sup>, C. O'Meara<sup>181</sup>, T. Ruys<sup>182</sup>, J. Schulhofer-Wohl<sup>183</sup> and R. Trapp<sup>184</sup>. Finally, it should be noted the candidate dissertations of Dmitry I. Bulgaru<sup>185</sup> and Anna V. Stebneva<sup>186</sup>, as well as the doctoral dissertation of K. Trautman<sup>187</sup>.

Among other things, it is also necessary to mention the presence of a huge number of analytical comments, articles and reports prepared by various analytical centers both in Russia and abroad – the Russian International Affairs Council<sup>188</sup>, the Valdai International Discussion Club<sup>189</sup>, the Middle East

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<sup>169</sup> *Samuilov S., Panyuzheva M.* US fight against ISIS\* and Russia's response (In Russ.) // USA & Canada: Economics, Politics, Culture. 2016, №1. P. 3-21. (with \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked)

<sup>170</sup> *Shumilin A.* The Syrian Crisis and US Policy in the Middle East (In Russ.) // USA & Canada: Economics, Politics, Culture. 2014, №4. P. 43-54.

<sup>171</sup> *Gani J. K.* The Role of Ideology in Syrian-US Relations: Conflict and Cooperation. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 238 p. DOI: 10.1057/9781137358356

<sup>172</sup> *Gowans S.* Washington's Long War on Syria. Montreal: Baraka Books, 2017. 278 p.

<sup>173</sup> *Warrick J.* The Red Line: The Unraveling of Syria and America's Race to Destroy the Most Dangerous Arsenal in the World. New York: Doubleday, 2020. 368 p.

<sup>174</sup> *Burns S., Stravers A.* Obama, Congress, and Audience Costs: Shifting the Blame on the Red Line // Political Science Quarterly. 2020, Vol. 135, No. 1. P. 67-101. DOI: 10.1002/polq.12997

<sup>175</sup> *Cragin R.K.* Tactical partnerships for strategic effects: recent experiences of US forces working by, with, and through surrogates in Syria and Libya // Defence Studies. 2020, Vol. 20, No. 4. P. 318-335. DOI: 10.1080/14702436.2020.1807338

<sup>176</sup> *Manfredi Firmian F.* Strengthening the US Partnership with the Syrian Democratic Forces // Survival. 2021, Vol. 63, No. 6. P. 159-182. DOI: 10.1080/00396338.2021.2006456

<sup>177</sup> *Mouritzen H.* 'Remember Iraq!' Learning theory and the 2013 non-decision on air strikes against Syria // International Politics. 2020, Vol. 57. P. 954-972. DOI: 10.1057/s41311-020-00207-x

<sup>178</sup> *Murray D.* Military action but not as we know it: Libya, Syria and the making of an Obama Doctrine // Contemporary Politics. 2013, Vol. 19, No. 2. P. 146-166. DOI: 10.1080/13569775.2013.785827

<sup>179</sup> *Notte H.* The United States, Russia, and Syria's chemical weapons: a tale of cooperation and its unravelling // The Nonproliferation Review. 2020, Vol. 27, No. 1-3. P. 221-224. DOI: 10.1080/10736700.2020.1766226

<sup>180</sup> *Paphiti A., Bachmann S.-D.* Syria: A Legacy of Western Foreign-Policy Failure // Middle East Policy. 2018, Vol. XXV, No. 2. P. 136-162.

<sup>181</sup> *O'Meara C.* February 2021 American airstrikes in Syria: necessary and proportionate acts of self-defence or unlawful armed reprisals? // Journal on the Use of Force and International Law. 2022, Vol. 9, Issue 1. P. 78-98. DOI: 10.1080/20531702.2022.2029021

<sup>182</sup> *Ruys T.* Of Arms, Funding and "Nonlethal Assistance" – Issues Surrounding Third-State Intervention in the Syrian Civil War // Chinese Journal of International Law. 2014, Vol. 13, No. 1. P. 13-53. DOI: 10.1093/chinesejil/jmu003

<sup>183</sup> *Schulhofer-Wohl J.* The Obama administration and civil war in Syria, 2011–2016: US presidential foreign policy making as political risk management // Journal of Transatlantic Studies. 2021, Vol. 19, No. 4. P. 517–547. DOI: 10.1057/s42738-021-00085-y

<sup>184</sup> *Trapp R.* Elimination of the Chemical Weapons Stockpile of Syria // Journal of Conflict & Security Law. 2014, Vol. 19, No. 1. P. 7-23. DOI: 10.1093/jcsl/kru002

<sup>185</sup> *Bulgaru D.* The evolution of US foreign policy in the Middle East towards Syria and Iran. (In Russ.). Dissertation submitted for the degree of Candidate of Historical Sciences. Mytishchi, 2019. 261 p.

<sup>186</sup> *Stebneva A.* Conflict of interests of the Russian Federation and the United States in Syria: a political analysis. (In Russ.). Moscow, 2021. 186 p.

<sup>187</sup> *Trautman K.* Strategic Negligence: Why the United States Failed to Provide Military Support to the Syrian Resistance in 2011-2014. A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. University of South Florida, 2018. 318 p.

<sup>188</sup> *Timofeev I.* Sanctions against Syria – Russia in sight? (In Russ.) // RIAC. March 4, 2019. URL:

<https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/sanktsii-protiv-sirii-v-pritsele-rossiya/> (accessed: 24.03.2023)

<sup>189</sup> *Aksenenok A.* The Syrian crisis: the thorny movement from war to peace (In Russ.) // Valdai Notes. №104. July 11, 2019. 27 c.

Institute<sup>190</sup>, the Congressional Research Service<sup>191</sup>, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)<sup>192</sup>, RAND Corporation<sup>193</sup>, Brookings Institution<sup>194</sup>, Council on Foreign Relations<sup>195</sup>, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace\*\*<sup>196</sup>, The Heritage Foundation<sup>197</sup>, Hoover Institution<sup>198</sup>, Foreign Policy Research Institute<sup>199</sup>, Middle East Institute<sup>200</sup>, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy<sup>201</sup>, etc.

Summing up the literature review, not only its fragmentation and insufficient coverage of the topic we are considering should be noted, but also a rather serious degree of its politicization. Of course, the partisanship of scientists, researchers and analysts does not reach the level of journalists and publicists, but in any case, American researchers view the Syrian events through the prism of their national interests, Russian ones – theirs, while Turkish ones – theirs.

It is also necessary to pay attention to the presence of serious gaps in the study of American policy towards the Syrian conflict. In addition to the already mentioned lack of major works generally devoted to this topic, there are also practically no separate works on the work of American diplomacy in the context of the peaceful settlement of the war in Syria, the activities of the Friends of Syria group and the “small group” on Syria, as well as, by a completely obvious reasons, on the Syrian policy of the Biden administration. The operations of the Pentagon and the CIA to arm and train Syrian rebels, as well as the US sanctions policy towards Syria, are not covered in sufficient detail. The main problems highlighted

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<sup>190</sup> *Akhmedov V.* On the process of normalizing relations between Syria and the Arab states (In Russ.) // Middle East Institute. October 11, 2021. URL: <http://www.iimes.ru/?p=80199> (accessed: 03.03.2023)

<sup>191</sup> *Zanotti J., Thomas C.* Turkey (Türkiye): Background and U.S. Relations // Congressional Research Service. January 9, 2023. 68 p.

<sup>192</sup> *Saxton A.* U.S. Airstrikes in Syria and Iraq: Legal Authorities and Presidential War Powers // Center for Strategic and International Studies. July 8, 2021. URL: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-airstrikes-syria-and-iraq-legal-authorities-and-presidential-war-powers> (accessed: 17.02.2023)

<sup>193</sup> *Jenkins B.M.* Why Would Assad Use Chemical Weapons? // RAND. April 14, 2017. URL: <https://www.rand.org/blog/2017/04/why-would-assad-use-chemical-weapons.html> (accessed: 30.04.2020)

<sup>194</sup> *Wright T.* The fraught politics facing Biden’s foreign policy // Brookings. November 22, 2020. URL: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/11/23/the-fraught-politics-facing-bidens-foreign-policy/> (accessed: 10.02.2023)

<sup>195</sup> *Danin R.* President Trump’s Syria Strikes Are Not About Syria // Council on Foreign Relations. April 16, 2018. URL: <https://www.cfr.org/blog/president-trumps-syria-strikes-are-not-about-syria> (accessed: 30.04.2020)

<sup>196</sup> *Naim M.* Why Libya, But Not Syria? // Carnegie Endowment for International Peace\*\*. May 18, 2011. URL: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2011/05/18/why-libya-but-not-syria-pub-44067> (accessed: 15.02.2023) (with \*\* the organizations performing as the foreign agents are marked)

<sup>197</sup> *Bolton J.* Beyond the Axis of Evil: Additional Threats from Weapons of Mass Destruction // The Heritage Foundation. May 6, 2002. URL: <https://www.heritage.org/defense/report/beyond-the-axis-evil-additional-threats-weapons-mass-destruction-0> (accessed: 11.02.2023)

<sup>198</sup> *Badran T.* Strategic Geography Of The Middle East // Hoover Institution. June 27, 2019. URL: <https://www.hoover.org/research/strategic-geography-middle-east> (accessed: 23.02.2023)

<sup>199</sup> *Randall D.* Syrian Thaw? Arab Normalization With Damascus Ahead of the Arab League Summit // Foreign Policy Research Institute. January 12, 2022. URL: <https://www.fpri.org/article/2022/01/syrian-thaw-arab-normalization-with-damascus-ahead-of-the-arab-league-summit/> (accessed: 03.03.2023)

<sup>200</sup> *Lister C.* Amid efforts to normalize Assad’s regime, the need for a new US Syria policy is clear // Middle East Institute. March 24, 2022. URL: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/amid-efforts-normalize-assads-regime-need-new-us-syria-policy-clear> (accessed: 03.03.2023)

<sup>201</sup> *Welch J.S., Bailey K.* In Pursuit of Good Ideas: The Syria Train-and-Equip Program // The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. 2016. URL: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/pursuit-good-ideas-syria-train-and-equip-program> (accessed: 25.01.2023)

in the literature remain Operation Inherent Resolve, the peaceful settlement of the situation around Syrian chemical weapons, as well as air strikes on Syrian territory in April 2017 and April 2018.

**The scientific novelty** of this study lies in the fact that for the first time in Russian historical science an attempt is made to comprehensively analyze the policy of the United States regarding the Syrian civil War. The factors that influenced the formation of the US foreign policy were identified and characterized. The previously overlooked aspects of the US Syrian policy, such as the work of American diplomacy in the context of a peaceful settlement of the war in Syria, the activities of the Friends of Syria group and the “small group” in Syria, the Pentagon and CIA operations to arm and train Syrian rebels, US sanctions policy against Syria have been studied and characterized. For the first time, the Syrian policy of the Biden administration during the first two years of its work (2021-2022) is examined.

**The theoretical significance** of the work lies in the development of a special approach to the study of the policy of the United States in relation to armed conflicts of current time based on the optics of neoclassical realism. If necessary, this model can be applied to US policy in relation to other conflicts, such as Libyan or Ukrainian. The results of the study complement the developments of Russian and foreign Americanists, reveal previously untouched aspects of Washington's Syrian policy.

**The practical significance** of the study lies in the possibility of applying the results of the study, as well as the developed model for educational and methodological purposes – in creating manuals and textbooks, developing training courses on the history of international relations, US foreign policy, as well as international relations in the Middle East. In addition, as already mentioned above, this work may be in demand by the Russian authorities responsible for the formation and implementation of Russia's foreign policy in the Middle East.

**The structure of the work** corresponds to the goals and objectives, as well as the chosen research methodology. Chapter 1 examines the origins of the crisis in US-Syria relations and examines the various external and internal factors that have collectively shaped United States policy in Syria. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 examine in turn the activities of each of the three US administrations that have had to deal with the Syrian conflict - Barack Obama's, Donald Trump's, and Joe Biden's. Each chapter examines the different directions and specific actions taken by each administration as part of its Syrian policy. It is important to note that some issues – such as the dynamics of the US military presence in Syria or the diplomatic struggle over the extension of the cross-border mechanism – are considered in the chapters in the chronological period of which they were most acute. Finally, in the final part of the study, conclusions are drawn about the common and specific in the Syrian policy of each administration, as well as its evolution over the period under study is analyzed.

**Provisions for defense:**

- Domestic political variables have had a major impact on the development and implementation of US policy in Syria. The foreign policy attitudes of the US presidents and members of their cabinet

have significantly influenced the perception of the threat from the conflict and its participants and, accordingly, their specific actions. Public opinion in the overwhelming majority of cases was opposed to active involvement in Syrian affairs, which the American leadership also could not ignore. At the same time, when the United States nevertheless intervened in the conflict, they did so in full accordance with the norms of American strategic culture: in the form of massive swift strikes with high-precision weapons, and also in order to avoid unnecessary losses on their part, acting with the support of local allies.

- The situation around the Syrian conflict very clearly shows the degradation of the level of influence of the United States on the situation in the Middle East. If in 2011 Washington acted jointly in the conflict with most of the countries of the region (with the exception of Iran and Lebanon), by 2022 it was possible to observe a revolt on all fronts: the Arab monarchies were moving towards normalization of relations with the Syrian government, and Türkiye has already carried out three operations against the Kurdish allies of the US and for two years has been threatening with a fourth one. And if Washington could somehow deter the aggressive actions of Ankara, then it was no longer possible to prevent the rapprochement of Damascus with Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Amman.
- In its Syrian policy (especially at an early stage), the United States attached great importance to the activities of various informal associations designed to consolidate its allies bypassing the UN Security Council, where Washington encountered stubborn resistance from Moscow and Beijing. These associations at different times had different names – the Friends of Syria group, the “small group” on Syria, the Syrian Contact Group, but eventually they all ended up in the diplomatic “backyard”. This practice was likely a continuation of the idea of a “coalition of the willing”, and its closest successor is the “Summit for Democracy”. However, in addition to the commonality of concepts, all of the above formats have one more thing in common, and, what is more important, a weak spot – most of the member countries participated there only to receive political dividends.
- Washington's strategic approach throughout the conflict was unified and consisted in the need to overthrow the government of Bashar al-Assad, but from a tactical point of view, US policy has continuously evolved:
  - At the first stage (2011-2013), the American leadership chose the path that combines secrecy and direct involvement in the conflict as much as possible. The United States publicly provided only diplomatic and economic support to the rebels, while at the same time secretly supplying them with various weapons.
  - In the second phase (2014-2017), which largely stemmed from the first, as well as from Washington's previous Middle East policy, the United States tried to implement a plan to

overthrow the government in Damascus with the hands of the Islamic State\*<sup>202</sup>. This approach almost brought success to the US, but its final implementation was prevented by the military operation of the Russian Aerospace Forces, which began in September 2015 and helped the Assad government not only stand, but even to recapture most of the Syrian territory from ISIS\*.

- At the third stage, which began in 2017-2018, the American approach to the Syrian conflict evolved towards its all-out prolongation. Realizing that Damascus and its allies had actually won a military victory in the civil war, the United States did everything possible to prevent this victory from being converted into the restoration of the pre-war status quo by strengthening the anti-Syrian sanctions regime, artificially maintaining the fragmentation of the country, maintaining its military presence in non-government-controlled territories, as well as keeping diplomatic pressure on Syria and its allies.
- US policy towards the Syrian conflict has been the policy of compromise. All three administrations, which had to deal with the intricate Syrian tangle of contradictions, were forced to constantly maneuver between extremely polar positions on various issues related to the conflict, both at the international (systemic) and domestic political levels. The result of this was the constant adoption of half-hearted decisions, which, on the one hand, could not lead to a resolution of the conflict on American terms, and on the other hand, should not allow this to be done on the terms of Syria and its allies. This resulted in the flourishing of Islamic extremism, hundreds of thousands of victims, an artificial extension of the conflict and a stalemate in the Syrian peace process, from which there is no way out to date.

**Approbation and publication of the results of the study.** On the subject of this study, to date, the author has prepared and published three articles in peer-reviewed scientific journals from the list approved by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation:

- *Yurk A.* Syrian factor in Türkiye – NATO relations: A minor barrier or the beginning of the end of bloc solidarity? (In Russ.) // *Asia and Africa Today*. 2021, № 6. P. 20-26. DOI: 10.31857/S032150750015268-6
- *Yurk A.* The Syrian Policy of the Joe Biden Administration (In Russ.) // *Russia and America in the 21st Century*. 2022. Special Issue. DOI: 10.18254/S207054760023964-7
- *Yurk A.* Barack Obama’s diplomacy and Syrian peace process (In Russ.) // *USA & Canada: Economics, Politics, Culture*. 2023, No. 1. P. 77-94. DOI: 10.31857/S2686673023010042

In addition, certain provisions and theses of the study were tested in presentations at conferences at the Primakov Institute of World Economy and International Relations of the Russian Academy of Sciences (“Theories and Methods in International Relations”, 2022), Institute for US and Canadian

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<sup>202</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences (“USA in 2022”, 2022), the Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (VII and VIII Annual International Scientific Conferences of Young Scientists, 2020, 2021), St. Petersburg State University (IX International Student Scientific Conference, 2021), as well as within the framework of the IV Youth Session of the Primakov Readings-2021.

## Chapter 1. Historical and Theoretical Foundations of the Study

### 1.1. Evolution of U.S.-Syrian Relations (1944-2010)

The situation where Washington and Damascus became adversaries was not a sudden development, but rather a natural result of the long-standing history of their bilateral relations.

Syria was among the nations that attained complete independence following World War II. The process of achieving this freedom was arduous and required the intervention of the United States to compel the withdrawal of French and British troops from Syrian territory by 1946. However, one should not assume that the US acted for purely altruistic reasons. In fact, an agreement had already been signed in 1944 for the construction of seven oil pipelines stretching from the Arabian Peninsula to the Mediterranean Sea, two of which were slated to terminate on the Lebanese coast. The most direct route for these pipelines passed through Syrian territory, thus prompting the United States, which sought to cultivate ties with independent nations, to advocate for Syria's complete independence<sup>203</sup>.

Syria's history in the following decade was largely defined by a series of coups d'état, many of which were instigated by American or British intelligence services<sup>204</sup>. This trend was partly driven by the ongoing competition between the US and Britain for control of the Middle East, partly by the American-led Tapline oil pipeline project that aimed to connect Saudi oil fields to Lebanese ports via Syrian territory<sup>205</sup>, and partly by the broader struggle between the Western powers and the Soviet Union for influence in the region<sup>206</sup>. Nonetheless, the United States' misguided strategy of placing its faith in individuals rather than political parties proved disastrous, ultimately making it impossible to establish stable bilateral relations with Syria. As a result, the US became closely associated in the country with discredited and ousted regimes<sup>207</sup>.

Under such circumstances, Syria sought to avoid further destabilization and found a solution by forming the United Arab Republic (UAR) in 1958 in partnership with Nasser's<sup>208</sup> Egypt. The United States initially welcomed this alliance, hoping that it would shield Syria from the spread of "international communism." However, Syria withdrew from the UAR three years later, which initially raised concerns among American policymakers. Nevertheless, this led to a period of close interaction between the two

<sup>203</sup> *Pir-Budagova E.* The history of Syria... (In Russ.). P. 74.

<sup>204</sup> *Bandeira L.A.M.* The World Disorder. Springer, 2019. P. 113-119. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-030-03204-3

<sup>205</sup> *Pir-Budagova E.* The history of Syria... (In Russ.). P. 91.

<sup>206</sup> *Kennedy Jr. R.F.* Why the Arabs don't want us in Syria // Politico. February 22, 2016. URL: <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/02/rfk-jr-why-arabs-dont-trust-america-213601/> (дата обращения: 23.02.2020)

<sup>207</sup> *Gani J. K.* The Role of Ideology in Syrian-US Relations: Conflict and Cooperation. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. P. 41. DOI: 10.1057/9781137358356

<sup>208</sup> Gamal Abdel Nasser – Egyptian revolutionary, military officer, statesman and politician, second President of Egypt (1956-1970), President of the United Arab Republic (1958-1970), founder of Nasserism (pan-Arab socialist movement).



countries. However, a new wave of coups followed, culminating in the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party's seizure of power in Syria on March 8, 1963. Given the party's anti-communist stance, Washington recognized the legitimacy of the new regime and held out hope for establishing positive relations with Damascus.<sup>209</sup>

The Six Day War and the Yom Kippur War represented a turning point in the United States' perception of Syria. Following the loss of the Golan Heights to Israel, Syria became embroiled in the Arab-Israeli conflict and faced a crucial decision: either accept the United States as a mediator in the conflict or reject it. Egypt chose the former path, but Syria viewed this as a betrayal, especially after the United States openly recognized Israel's new borders. Hafez al-Assad, who had consolidated his power in Syria by 1970, signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the USSR, supported Palestinian militants in Lebanon, welcomed the Islamic Revolution and aligned with Tehran during the Iran-Iraq War.<sup>210</sup> In response, the United States designated Syria as a State Sponsor of Terrorism and imposed harsh sanctions, while also turning a blind eye to Israel's invasion of Lebanon in the hope that it would provoke a clash with Damascus.<sup>211</sup>

In the late 1980s, President Assad recognized that the socialist bloc was collapsing and shifted his focus to strengthening ties with Washington. His efforts paid off, as the United States eased the sanctions on Syria, and Syria participated in Operation Desert Storm. Additionally, the two countries' presidents had their first face-to-face meetings in many years.<sup>212</sup> The change in leadership in Syria was also viewed favorably by Washington, as the US hoped that Bashar al-Assad would adopt a different policy than his father and even potentially negotiate a peace agreement with Israel.<sup>213</sup>

However, the aspirations of the US government were not realized, and the nature of US-Syrian relations began to resemble an erratic pendulum. Syria opposed the invasion of Iraq in 2003, permitted the passage of jihadist volunteers through its Iraqi border, and provided refuge to several prominent members of Iraq's former government.<sup>214</sup> In response, President George W. Bush demanded that Syria withdraw its troops from Lebanon and cease its support of Hezbollah. Although Bashar al-Assad made some concessions, the relationship continued to deteriorate. Damascus was accused of destabilizing Iraq, and even faced the prospect of a possible invasion by the US, which was averted only due to the prolonged Iraq conflict.<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> *Rumyantsev V.* The United States and the Syrian political “rodeo” (1961-1963) (In Russ.) // Bulletin of Tomsk State University. 2014, №378. P. 144-147.

<sup>210</sup> *Bratersky M.* The USA and the troubled countries... (In Russ.). P. 125.

<sup>211</sup> *Dobson A.P., Marsh S.* US Foreign Policy Since 1945. London; New York: Routledge. 2002. P. 101.

<sup>212</sup> *Scheller B.* The Wisdom of Syria’s Waiting Game: Foreign Policy Under the Assads. London; Hurst & Company, 2013. P. 49-55.

<sup>213</sup> *Kleib S.* The destruction of Syria... (In Russ.). P. 55-58.

<sup>214</sup> *Gürçan E.C.* Domestic and External Factors in the Syrian Conflict: Toward a Multi-causal Explanation // *Amour P.O.* (ed.). The Regional Order in the Gulf Region and the Middle East. Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2020. P. 344. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-030-45465-4\_11

<sup>215</sup> *Bulgaru D.* The evolution of US foreign... (In Russ.). P. 129-130.

After the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States, the pendulum appeared to have swung in a more favorable direction for Syria. The new administration initiated a policy of rapprochement with Damascus, starting with the lifting of negative travel advisories for American citizens visiting the country. Additionally, Robert Ford was appointed as the first American ambassador to Syria since 2005. Diplomatic contacts between Damascus and Washington were renewed, including a visit by William Burns, the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, to Syria. There were even discussions of resuming the Syrian-Israeli dialogue with the assistance of the US.

However, at the same time, the US continued its policy of interference in the internal affairs of Syria. Thus, thanks to WikiLeaks documents, it became known that the US State Department secretly sponsored the Syrian opposition and various anti-government projects, incl. satellite TV channel “Barada TV”. Funding for these projects began under Bush, but continued under Obama.<sup>216</sup>

Based on the information provided, it is evident that bilateral relations between the United States and Syria remained consistently strained. The US continually sought to exert control over Syria, which conflicted with Damascus' national interests, particularly in light of US support for Israel. As a consequence, Syria consistently aligned itself with any powerful actor opposing Washington and Tel Aviv, thereby exacerbating an already challenging relationship with the US. Consequently, the US involvement on the side of the rebels in the Syrian conflict was anticipated given the historical context.

## **1.2. Determinants of the U.S. Position on Syria: Systemic Factors, U.S. Foreign and Domestic Policy**

Next, we will look at the different variables and modifiers that, in accordance with the methodology of neoclassical realism, have shaped the American foreign policy towards the Syrian conflict. It should be especially noted that their influence is unequal and uneven. Therefore, the remaining three paragraphs of this chapter will attempt to characterize to what extent and at what time intervals, which variable influenced the formation of US Syrian policy.

### **1.2.1. Systemic Variables**

#### **Distribution of Power**

The first and probably the oldest variable, if not in the international relations theory in general, then at least within its realist paradigm, is power or distribution of power. Despite its antiquity and crucial importance to the paradigm, power still lacks any well-established definition<sup>217</sup>. Ripsman, Taliaferro,

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<sup>216</sup> Naiman R. Syria / The WikiLeaks Files: The World According to US Empire. London; New York: Verso, 2015. P. 297-321.

<sup>217</sup> See: Schmidt B.C. Competing Realist Conceptions of Power // Millennium: Journal of International Studies. 2005, 33(3). P. 523-549. DOI: 10.1177/03058298050330031401

and Lobell tend to use the “elements of national power approach” in their work, which “treats power as resources” and “separates “power” from “influence”<sup>218</sup>.

Turning to our topic, it would be useful to note that the meaning of force in relation to the subject of the US-Syrian confrontation is both significant and insignificant. On the one hand, a significant difference in weight between the US and the SAR sets the background for bilateral relations. On the other hand, specific “power indicators” in this confrontation do not require too much description and are not so important, since a) the difference in economic, military and other potentials between the United States and Syria is obvious, and b) this is not a classic military confrontation on the battlefield like the Iraqi war, but a “proxy war”<sup>219</sup> in which the interests of various state and non-state actors converge, as well as the alliances between them. Therefore, here we will depart somewhat from the neoclassical tradition and apply the “relational power approach”, which considers power as “actual or potential relationship between actors”<sup>220</sup>.

Let us consider the balance of power in the Middle East at the beginning of the protests in Syria in the beginning of 2011. At that time, the United States was the patron for most states in the region. With some, Washington was bound by the terms of the North Atlantic Treaty (Türkiye), with some by the known “special relationship” (Israel), with the rest by informal guarantees of the region's security and a long history of military and economic cooperation (Arab monarchies). Practically in all countries of the region there were American military bases<sup>221</sup>. In addition, we should not forget about the high potential of attracting extra-regional allies to the affairs of the region, primarily Great Britain (including the Commonwealth countries) and France.

Syria didn't have such a number of allies. On its side were the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Libyan militant organization and political party Hezbollah, connected with the government in Damascus by ideological and religious ties; to a lesser extent – Russia, which acted as the legal successor of the USSR in the Soviet-Syrian treaty of friendship and cooperation<sup>222</sup>. Partly the People's Republic of China could also be considered as an ally of Syria, because had its own interests in the country and the region (primarily economic ones), and was also not interested in another violent regime change as a result of the American invasion<sup>223</sup>.

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<sup>218</sup> Ripsman N., Taliaferro J., Lobell S. Neoclassical Realist Theory... P. 44.

<sup>219</sup> Güntay V. Analysis of Proxy Wars from a Neorealist Perspective; Case of Syrian Crisis // *Tesam Akademi Dergisi*. 2020, Vol. 7, No. 2. P. 491-516. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.30626/tesamakademi.788857>

<sup>220</sup> Ripsman N.M., Taliaferro J.W., Lobell S.E. Neoclassical Realist Theory... P. 44.

<sup>221</sup> See: Sun D. The US Military Bases in the Gulf Cooperation Council States: Dynamics of Readjustment // *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)*. 2010, Vol. 4, No. 4. P. 44-63. DOI: 10.1080/19370679.2010.12023167; U.S. Military Bases and Facilities in the Middle East // American Security Project. June 2018. URL: <https://www.americansecurityproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Ref-0213-US-Military-Bases-and-Facilities-Middle-East.pdf> (accessed: 14.02.2023)

<sup>222</sup> Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation... (In Russ.). URL: <https://docs.cntd.ru/document/420354345> (accessed: 23.02.2023)

<sup>223</sup> Qasim M.M.A. The Chinese position on the Syrian crisis 2011 // *Eurasian Journal of History, Geography and Economics*. 2022, Vol. 4. P. 1-12.

However, over time, the balance of power has changed. First, the assistance provided to Syria by its allies has exceeded US expectations. According to American analysts, this was explained by an “asymmetry of interests”: “Those supporting the Assad regime see the conflict's stakes in starker terms than do supporters of the opposition.”<sup>224</sup>

The only way for the United States to correct this state of affairs could be more active, including direct military involvement in the Syrian conflict. However, for strategic reasons, Washington could no longer afford it<sup>225</sup>. The so-called “pivot to Asia” proclaimed at the end of 2011 to counter the upcoming systemic challenge from China<sup>226</sup> did not completely, but fettered the actions of the White House, preventing it from intervening in another Middle East conflict, which could become a second Afghanistan or Iraq<sup>227</sup>.

Such a strategic maneuver, in turn, could not help but set off a “chain reaction” in relations between the United States and its Middle Eastern allies, who reacted to this decision “with a mixture of concern and uncertainty.”<sup>228</sup> Despite the fact that in the end the United States were not “pivoting away from their long-time allies, but rebalancing its diplomatic, economic, and strategic focus following a decade of war”<sup>229</sup>, Washington's decision gave rise to distrust in Ankara, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi in all its future actions perceived through the prism of the fact that in the future they will probably have to deal with regional problems and threats on their own, without the help of their overseas patron. With regard to the war in Syria, this led first to the gradual drift of Türkiye towards pursuing its own interests in the conflict through increasing cooperation with Russia and Iran, and then to the slow inclinations of the Gulf monarchies towards normalization of relations with Damascus.

### **Strategic Environment**

The next systemic variable we consider is the strategic environment, which can be either permissive or restrictive. The degree of permissiveness of the environment depends on how close and imminent the existing threats or opportunities are, and the more dangerous the threats or enticing the opportunities are, the more restrictive the strategic environment is.<sup>230</sup> In addition, the more permissive the environment is,

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<sup>224</sup> Martini J., York E., Young W. Syria as an Arena of Strategic Competition // RAND Corporation. March 18, 2013. URL: [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR213.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR213.html) (accessed: 26.02.2023)

<sup>225</sup> Phillips C. The international system and the Syrian civil war // *International Relations*. 2022, Vol. 36, No. 6. P. 9. DOI: 10.1177/00471178221097908

<sup>226</sup> See: Clinton H. America's Pacific Century // *Foreign Policy*. October 11, 2011. URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/> (accessed: 26.02.2023); Remarks By President Obama to the Australian Parliament // The White House. November 17, 2011. URL: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament> (accessed: 26.02.2023)

<sup>227</sup> Mintz A., Wayne C. The Polythink Syndrome... P. 141.

<sup>228</sup> Hashimoto N. The US “Pivot” to the Asia-Pacific and US Middle East Policy: Towards an Integrated Approach // Middle East Institute. March 15, 2013. URL: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/us-pivot-asia-pacific-and-us-middle-east-policy-towards-integrated-approach> (accessed: 26.02.2023)

<sup>229</sup> Davidson J. The U.S. “Pivot to Asia” // *American Journal of Chinese Studies*. 2014, Vol. 21, Special Issue. P. 78.

<sup>230</sup> Ripsman N.M., Taliaferro J.W., Lobell S.E. Neoclassical Realist Theory... P. 52.

the greater the role of ideological factors in the foreign policy of the state, and vice versa, the more restrictive the environment is, the more important material, systemic factors are.<sup>231</sup>

From the United States' point of view, by the time the Syrian conflict began, the strategic environment was exceptionally favorable. The only superpower on the planet that was not yet openly challenged either by Russia or China, in addition had almost all the states of the Middle East region as its allies. The only exceptions were Iran and its closest ally Syria, which was Tehran's gateway to the Mediterranean and the Levant.

It was this factor that became the restrictive factor for the US strategic environment. When protests began in Syria, and then gradually turned into a civil war during the spring-summer of 2011, a unique opportunity opened up for the United States to overthrow the government in Damascus and establish their own, Sunni-controlled government, and such an opportunity simply could not be missed. On the other hand, the environment was not all restrictive then, so the US were left with options for responding, which can conditionally be reduced to a choice between direct or indirect involvement in the conflict.

In August-September 2013, at the height of the crisis around the chemical attack in eastern Ghouta, the strategic environment was rather ambiguous for the United States. On the one hand, it opened up the opportunity, under a plausible pretext, to directly intervene in the Syrian conflict, accelerating its denouement, which had to be implemented within a limited time frame. On the other hand, the international situation and, accordingly, the environment was restrictive for the United States in the truest sense of the word. Russia and China in the UN Security Council have already blocked anti-Syrian resolutions several times, and the Western allies were not eager to arrange "Libya 2.0".

Then, in 2014 the US faced an imminent threat, both for itself and for its allies, primarily in the Middle East. The ISIL\*<sup>232</sup> threatened to completely redraw the map of the region, demolishing Middle Eastern regimes loyal to Washington, forcing the US to intervene. At the same time, it provided an excellent opportunity to intervene in the Syrian conflict under the plausible pretext of fighting terrorism.

The following year, when the Russian Aerospace Forces fully entered the Syrian conflict, the threat of an accidental incident between the two largest nuclear powers was also very high, which led to the creation of a deconflicting regime. However, the matter was limited to this, since at that time Russia had already thrown a serious challenge to Western domination in the Crimea and Ukraine, and the possibility of full-fledged cooperation between the countries was cut off.

Finally, a variety of factors have caused the United States' Middle Eastern allies to gradually move away from their policy of almost unconditional submission to Washington. With regard to Syria, an indicator of this was first the change in the position of Türkiye, hit by the US support for the Kurdish YPG, and then the slow inclinations of the Arab monarchies (leading by the United Arab Emirates)

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid. P. 158-159.

<sup>232</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

towards normalizing relations with the Assad regime<sup>233</sup>. Given the unusually high stakes for the United States in the Syrian conflict, such insubordination posed a rather serious threat.

### **Strategic Clarity**

The final and, according to Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell, central system variable for neoclassical realism is strategic clarity, which depends on a) the degree to which threats and opportunities are readily discernable; b) whether the system provides information on the time horizons of threats and opportunities; and c) whether optimal policy options stand out or not. In turn, the degree of evidence of the threat depends on how hostile the state or quasi-state is and has the ability to put this hostility into practice in the shortest possible time, and the degree of evidence of the possibility depends on the favorable position of the balance of power, the absence of possible resistance from other actors, and also the fragility of the combination of the two above factors<sup>234</sup>.

By the time the Syrian conflict began, the obviousness of the possibility of intervening in the conflict and getting rid of the government of Bashar al-Assad was not as great for the United States as it might seem at first glance. Yes, the balance of power generally favored the United States, but the likelihood of allied intervention in this case was much higher, unlike Libya<sup>235</sup>. On the other hand, it was possible to turn the whole operation around quickly, before Russia and Iran could do anything more serious than a protest, but here domestic variables intervened, which will be discussed later. As for policy options, here the United States, as noted above, could take the path of direct and indirect intervention in the conflict. Direct intervention could lead to heavy losses due to the serious military potential of Syria, as well as a possible military response from Iran and Russia<sup>236</sup>. Consequently, Washington was left with only the path of indirect intervention through diplomatic, humanitarian and military support for the opposition, as well as the imposition of sanctions on the SAR and its allies.

In the case of dealing with the Islamist threat, the situation was also rather ambiguous. The fact is that, as we will see below, according to the predominant in 2011-2013 in the West discourse, jihadists were only a marginal minority of the Syrian opposition, while the main, “moderate” part of it was the secular Free Syrian Army (FSA), and all warnings, including those from the Russian side, were perceived in Washington as “convenient rationalizations for blocking action.”<sup>237</sup> Therefore, the

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<sup>233</sup> See: *Henkel S.* The Difficult Normalization of Relations between Arab Countries and Bashar al-Assad // SWP Journal Review 2020/JR 01. November 17, 2020. DOI:10.18449/2020JR01; *Dykan 'D.* UAE as the initiator of Syria's return to the Arab world (In Russ.) // RIAC. December 17, 2021. URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/columns/sandbox/dae-v-rol-i-initsiatora-vozvrascheniya-sirii-v-arabskiy-mir/> (accessed: 15.02.2023)

<sup>234</sup> *Ripsman N.M., Taliaferro J.W., Lobell S.E.* Neoclassical Realist Theory... P. 46-47.

<sup>235</sup> *Naim M.* Why Libya, But Not Syria? // Carnegie Endowment for International Peace\*\*. May 18, 2011. URL: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2011/05/18/why-libya-but-not-syria-pub-44067> (accessed: 15.02.2023) (with \*\* the organizations performing as the foreign agents are marked)

<sup>236</sup> *Jahn E.* War and Compromise Between Nations and States. Springer, 2019. P. 160-161. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-030-34131-2

<sup>237</sup> *Clinton H.* Hard Choices. Simon & Shuster, 2014. P. 700.

American leadership only by the summer of 2014 realized that the Islamic State\*<sup>238</sup>, relying, among other things, on the Islamized Syrian opposition, began to pose an obvious existential threat to the entire Middle East, rapidly occupying more and more new territories in Iraq and Syria, as well as spreading its influence around the world.

### 1.2.2 Structural Modifiers

In the next paragraph, we will talk about the so-called structural modifiers – “systemic even though they clearly fall outside the meaning of structure.”<sup>239</sup>

#### Technologies

The technological factor has a peculiar significance for the issues under consideration. For Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, it means primarily military technology and the balance of their offensive and defensive capabilities.<sup>240</sup> Accordingly, we will try to consider this factor from this point of view.

As one of the leading domestic experts in military technology, Vadim B. Kozyulin, writes, the Gulf War, Operations Desert Storm and Infinite Reach, as well as the NATO operation in Yugoslavia in 1999, “showed that the bet on non-contact warfare justified itself.” From that moment on, “non-contact war turned into a trend for decades,” but the United States was “practically the only country with the finances, the advanced scientific base, and the colossal scientific potential for this.”<sup>241</sup>

Indeed, at the beginning of the Syrian conflict, the United States continued to have the No. 1 armed forces in the world, among other things due to the highest level of development of military technologies, thanks to the ability to spend huge amounts of money on R&D. Defense research spending increased from \$76.5<sup>242</sup> billion to \$117.7<sup>243</sup> billion between 2011 and 2022.

Nevertheless, these expenses don’t have very significant relation to the Syrian conflict – the United States already had everything necessary to participate in a conflict of this type at that time, moreover, it had been repeatedly tested earlier, for the last time – in Libya. There, the US and its allies were successful in neutralizing the Libyan army, largely due to their superiority in precision-guided weapons<sup>244</sup>, which has been actively developed in the Western military for decades. The very Tomahawk cruise missiles

<sup>238</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>239</sup> Ripsman N.M., Taliaferro J.W., Lobell S.E. Neoclassical Realist Theory... P. 39.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid. P. 40.

<sup>241</sup> Kozyulin V. United States on the road to strategic invulnerability (In Russ.) // RIAC. July 1, 2021. URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/soedinennye-shtaty-na-puti-k-strategicheskoy-neuyazvimosti/> (accessed: 19.02.2023)

<sup>242</sup> H.R. 6523. Ike Skelton National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2011. December 2010. Sec. 201. URL: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CPRT-111HPRT63160/pdf/CPRT-111HPRT63160.pdf> (accessed: 29.03.2023)

<sup>243</sup> S. 1605. National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022. December 27, 2021. Sec. 4201. URL: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-117publ81/pdf/PLAW-117publ81.pdf> (accessed: 05.04.2023)

<sup>244</sup> Troyan A. The main results of the Western military campaign in Libya (In Russ.) // Foreign military review. 2012, №4. P. 9.

were adopted by the United States as early as 1983. Also worth noting is the US advantage in unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) technology, which has been developing in its modern version since the 1990s<sup>245</sup>.

However, it is worth noting one serious obstacle that made the intervention of the United States and its allies in Syria very risky from the very beginning – the Syrian air defense system<sup>246</sup>. According to the Military Balance yearbook, in 2011 Syria had about 800 anti-aircraft missile systems of various types – from short-range systems (up to 15 km) Pantsir (*SA-22 Greyhound*), military air defense Kvadrat (*SA-6 Gainful*), Osa (*SA-8 Gecko*), Strela (*SA-9 Gaskin*) and Strela-10 (*SA-13 Gopher*) and short-range (15-50 km) S-75 (*SA-2 Guideline*) and S-125 (*SA-3 Goa*) to medium-range (30-100 km) Buk (*SA-11 Gadfly*) and long-range (> 200 km) S-200 (*SA-5 Gammon*) complexes (and this is not counting several thousand anti-aircraft guns suitable for countering low-flying aircraft and UAVs)<sup>247</sup>.

Despite all this treasure, the Syrian air defense also had serious problems, like the extreme obsolescence of the fleet of equipment, as well as the weakness of the grouping of radio-technical troops – radar reconnaissance equipment and electronic warfare. All this, according to experts, did not allow Syria “to confront the combined Air Force of a coalition of Western states conducting air offensive operations using several thousand cruise missiles, fighters, bombers, combat helicopters with mandatory preliminary fire and electronic suppression of air defense systems.”<sup>248</sup>

With all this, it is still of certain importance to take into account the serious strategic disadvantage of the United States and Western countries generally in the form of an extremely high sensitivity to human losses. The Syrian air defense might not have been able to repel a massive strike, but it would certainly have inflicted serious losses on the attacking group, at least due to the high density of fire. A striking example of this is the actions of the Syrian air defense in April 2018 when repelling missile attacks from the United States, the United Kingdom and France. In that case, according to reports from the Syrian and Russian sources, 46 out of 105 missiles fired by the Western coalition were shot down<sup>249</sup>.

As of 2022, Syrian air defense has undergone changes both for the better and for the worse. On the one hand, Syria finally received three divisions of long-range S-300PMU2 (*SA-20b Gargoyle*) anti-aircraft missile systems, which pose a threat to fourth-generation jets, including, for example, F-16 fighters, which are in service with the US, Israeli and Turkish air forces in large numbers<sup>250</sup>. In addition,

<sup>245</sup> See: *Evstafiev G.* The spread of unmanned aerial vehicles is a growing security threat (In Russ.) // *Yaderny Kontrol.* 2005, №2 (76). P. 55-65.

<sup>246</sup> *Murray D.* Military action but not as we know it: Libya, Syria and the making of an Obama Doctrine // *Contemporary Politics.* 2013, Vol. 19, No. 2. P. 153. DOI: 10.1080/13569775.2013.785827; *Souleimanov E.A., Dzutsati V.* Russia's Syria War: A Strategic Trap? // *Middle East Policy.* 2018, Vol. XXV, No. 2. P. 42.

<sup>247</sup> *The Military Balance 2011.* P. 331-332.

<sup>248</sup> *Gavrilov A.* Syrian air defense: salvation or illusion? (In Russ.) // *National Defense.* August 10, 2012. URL: <https://2009-2020.oborona.ru/includes/periodics/geopolitics/2012/1008/17389386/detail.shtml> (accessed: 19.02.2023)

<sup>249</sup> Syrian air defense destroyed 46 US and allied cruise missiles - General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces (In Russ.) // *Zvezda.* April 25, 2018. URL: <https://tvzvezda.ru/news/201804251223-sdnw.htm> (accessed: 19.02.2023)

<sup>250</sup> Can Syrian Missiles Threaten Turkish F-16s? A Look at Damascus' Five Most Capable Anti Aircraft Assets From S-300s to Foxbats and BuKs // *Military Watch Magazine.* March 5, 2020. URL: <https://militarywatchmagazine.com/article/can->



certain sectors of the Syrian sky are also covered by two Russian S-400 (*SA-21 Growler*) air defense divisions.<sup>251</sup>

On the other hand, the Syrian air defense system has suffered significant losses over the 12 years of the civil war – many systems have been destroyed or worn out sometimes to an unrepairable state<sup>252</sup>, and the latest systems may not be enough to effectively counter massive enemy strikes<sup>253</sup>. Finally, even the Russian S-400s may be powerless in the face of the latest fifth-generation jets, such as the F-35 fighters, which are in service with the United States and Israel.<sup>254</sup> Thus, before the start of mass production and the possible appearance in Syria of the S-500 air defense systems, specially designed to combat fifth-generation fighters.<sup>255</sup>, the United States and its allies still have a serious technological ace in the hole.

### International Law

Modern international law and international institutions are in many ways “the embodiment of the Western policy.”<sup>256</sup> Being largely a product of Western jurisprudence, outside West it, rightly or not, perceives by many as “recolonizational” and playing into the hands of its creators only.<sup>257</sup> In the same way critical researchers interpret the role and status of international organizations, including the main one – the United Nations, only as “a way to maintain the monopoly of the United States and Western Europe in international politics.”<sup>258</sup>

In a certain sense, this point of view seems to us logical and justified. As the Swiss political scientist Guy Mettan notes, “Any power without counter-power has a tendency to become absolute whether this takes place within a state or outside if there is no other power (powers) who would be able restrain it; law in itself is not the sufficient guarantee against such tendencies.”<sup>259</sup> In these circumstances, it is reasonable to assume that “a power that is dominant internationally is able to ‘interpret’ or rewrite

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syrian-missiles-neutralise-turkish-f-16s-a-look-at-damascus-five-most-capable-anti-aircraft-assets-from-s-300s-to-foxbats-and-buks (accessed: 19.02.2023)

<sup>251</sup> Second division of S-400 deployed in Syria (In Russ.) // Rossiyskaya gazeta. October 1, 2017. URL: <https://rg.ru/2017/10/01/v-sirii-razmeshchen-vtoroj-divizion-s-400.html> (дата обращения: 19.02.2023)

<sup>252</sup> See: *Kurdyanskiy A.* Air Defense Forces of the Syrian Arab Republic (In Russ.) // Foreign military review. 2022, №6. P. 57-61.

<sup>253</sup> *Selivanov V., Il'in Yu.* Analysis of the state of development of military-technical science (In Russ.) // Military thought. July 1, 2019. URL: <https://vm.ric.mil.ru/Stati/item/202664/> (accessed: 19.02.2023)

<sup>254</sup> *Osborn K.* Why It Might Be Impossible for Russia's S-300 or S-400 to Kill an F-35 or B-2 Bomber // The National Interest. November 27, 2018. URL: <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/why-it-might-be-impossible-russias-s-300-or-s-400-kill-f-35-or-b-2-bomber-37262> (accessed: 19.02.2023)

<sup>255</sup> S-500 systems began to enter service with the RF Armed Forces (In Russ.) // *Izvestiya*. May 18, 2022. URL: <https://iz.ru/1336140/2022-05-18/kompleksy-s-500-nachali-postupat-na-vooruzhenie-vs-rf> (accessed: 19.02.2023)

<sup>256</sup> *Shumilov V.* Russia and the West in the context of international law and civilizational approach (In Russ.) // Russian Foreign Economic Bulletin. 2014, №10. P. 96.

<sup>257</sup> See, e.g.: *Chimni B. S.* The Past, Present and Future of International Law: A Critical Third World Approach // Melbourne Journal of International Law. 2007, Vol. 8. P. 499-515; *Ikejiaku B.-V.* International Law is Western Made Global Law: The Perception of Third-World Category // African Journal of Legal Studies. 2013, Vol. 6. P. 337-356.

<sup>258</sup> *Bordachev T.* UN - reform or abolition? (In Russ.) // RIAC. July 26, 2022. URL: <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/oon-reforma-ili-uprazhdenie/> (accessed: 16.02.2023)

<sup>259</sup> *Mullerson R.* Putting Anarchy in Order // Russia in Global Affairs. 2016, No. 2. URL: <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/putting-anarchy-in-order/> (accessed: 05.04.2023)

international law in accordance with its own interest if there is no other powers able to resist.” As a result, “in a world with unipolar tendencies... international law (a result of bargaining and compromises) and its interpretation are dictated from a unipolar center,” so it actually stops working<sup>260</sup>.

The United States tried to act in this way long before the Syrian events. Despite that, in fact, military intervention, according to the norms of international law, is regulated by three articles of the UN Charter – 2 (4), 42 and 51<sup>261, 262</sup>, – the United States often goes beyond these norms. Serious debate in the international legal environment caused NATO interventions in the events in the Balkans in the 1990s<sup>263</sup>, the invasion of Iraq in 2003<sup>264</sup> and the intervention in Libya in 2011<sup>265</sup>. The latter case is especially noteworthy, since, as many believe, the unfortunate development of events in Libya became a vivid example of the failure of the famous concept of “humanitarian intervention” and its no less famous successor, “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P)<sup>266</sup>. However, the US, especially during the Obama presidency, has returned to the topic of R2P again and again<sup>267</sup>, despite that it is, in fact, just a concept, not an international legal norm, and a significant part of the international community is negative about to the Western interpretation<sup>268</sup>.

However, by the beginning of Obama's second term, R2P had become more of a propaganda slogan. It is no coincidence that in 2013, when the crisis around the chemical attack in Eastern Ghouta erupted, the White House tried not to mention R2P<sup>269</sup>, and for a possible international legal justification tried to far-fetch Article 51 of the UN Charter, which guarantees states the right to self-defense, referring to that

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<sup>260</sup> Ibid.

<sup>261</sup> United Nations Charter // United Nations. URL: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text> (accessed: 18.02.2023)

<sup>262</sup> Part 4 Article 2 of the UN Charter establishes the principle of refraining in their international relations from the threat or use of force. At the same time, Article 42 establishes that decisions on the use of military force “to maintain or restore international peace and security” are taken only by the UN Security Council, and Article 51 notes that “nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence.”

<sup>263</sup> See, e.g.: *Chinkin C.* The legality of NATO's action in the former republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) under international law // *International & Comparative Law Quarterly*. 2000, Vol. 49, No. 4. P. 910-925. DOI: 10.1017/S0020589300064733

<sup>264</sup> See, e.g.: *Links to Opinions on Legality of War Against Iraq* // Robin C. Miller. URL: <https://www.robincmiller.com/ir-legal.htm> (accessed: 17.02.2023)

<sup>265</sup> See, e.g.: *Terry P.* The Libya intervention (2011): neither lawful, nor successful // *The Comparative and International Law Journal of Southern Africa*. 2015, Vol. 48, No. 2. P. 162-182; *Simonsen S.* The Intervention in Libya in a Legal Perspective: R2P and International Law / *Henriksen D. and Larssen A.K. (eds)*. Political Rationale and International Consequences of the War in Libya. Oxford, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198767480.003.0014>

<sup>266</sup> *Tocci N.* The Responsibility to Protect in Libya and Syria: Europe, the USA and Global Human Rights Governance / *Alcaro R., Peterson J., Greco E. (eds)*. The West and the Global Power Shift: Transatlantic Relations and Global Governance. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. P. 221-246. DOI: 10.1057/978-1-137-57486-2\_11; *Kul S.* Libya and Syria: The Protection of Refugees and R2P / *Ercan P.G. (ed)*. The Responsibility to Protect Twenty Years On. Pallgrave Macmillan Cham, 2022. P. 144-145. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-030-90731-0

<sup>267</sup> The U.S. Strongly Supports the Concept of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) // U.S. Mission to International Organizations in Geneva. June 19, 2012. URL: <https://geneva.usmission.gov/2012/06/19/the-u-s-strong-supporter-of-the-concept-of-responsibility-to-protect-r2p/> (accessed: 17.02.2023)

<sup>268</sup> *Gevorgyan K.* To the reader of International Affairs. The concept of the responsibility to protect (In Russ.) // *International Affairs*. 2013, №8. URL: <https://interaffairs.ru/jauthor/material/920> (accessed: 17.02.2023)

<sup>269</sup> *Abramowitz M.* Does the United States have a ‘responsibility to protect’ the Syrian people? // *The Washington Post*. September 6, 2013. URL: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/does-the-united-states-have-a-responsibility-to-protect-the-syrian-people/2013/09/06/5decf4c0-167d-11e3-be6e-dc6ae8a5b3a8\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/does-the-united-states-have-a-responsibility-to-protect-the-syrian-people/2013/09/06/5decf4c0-167d-11e3-be6e-dc6ae8a5b3a8_story.html) (accessed: 17.02.2023)

the US must make sure“ that weapons of mass destruction are not proliferating, as well as need to protect our allies, our bases in the region.”<sup>270</sup> All this “would sound like preemptive self defence in a way that is very close to the Bush doctrine.”<sup>271</sup>

In 2014, a new serious problem of an international legal nature arose in Washington: how to justify hostilities against the Islamic State\*<sup>272</sup> in Syria if they are carried out without obtaining the consent of official Damascus or the sanction of the UN Security Council? The Congressional Research Service (CRS) has proposed two options for addressing this issue. The first is the justification of air strikes by the same Article 51 of the UN Charter, which allowed the use of force on the territory of another state in case of individual or collective self-defense. However, there was a problem in reading the wording. The text of the Article literally states that the use of force is permitted only if a direct attack on the defending state has already been made, a mere threat is not enough. At the same time, CRS cites a number of opinions that view this right as “encompassing the previously existing inherent right of self-defense”, implying again a preemptive strike – the “favorite child” of the Bush administration.

According to the second scenario, the American intervention was justified by the fact that the Syrian government was allegedly “unable or unwilling” to fight IS\* on its own. However, scholars themselves notice that, although such a wording is a precedent in American practice (for example, the invasion in Afghanistan was justified this way), it might not be accepted by the international community<sup>273</sup>. Ultimately, both scenarios were adopted by the United States<sup>274</sup>. Thus, despite the change of administrations, in practice, American approaches to solving problems remained much the same.

Much more interesting is the Trump administration's approach to the international legal justification for attacks on government troops and government and scientific institutions in Syria in April 2017 and 2018 – there’s... simply none. The president himself got off with general phrases about the fact that the strikes were aimed at forcing Damascus to comply with international agreements on the prohibition of chemical weapons<sup>275</sup>, although the United States, of course, had no authority to do so<sup>276</sup>. The main

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<sup>270</sup> Exclusive: Obama tells CNN key decisions nearing on Syria, Egypt // CNN. August 23, 2013. URL: <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/08/23/politics/obama-cnn-new-day-interview> (accessed: 17.02.2023)

<sup>271</sup> Akande D. The Legality of Military Action in Syria: Humanitarian Intervention and Responsibility to Protect // EJIL: Talk! August 28, 2013. URL: <https://www.ejiltalk.org/humanitarian-intervention-responsibility-to-protect-and-the-legality-of-military-action-in-syria/> (accessed: 17.02.2023)

<sup>272</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>273</sup> Garcia M.J., Elsea J.K. U.S. Military Action Against the Islamic State\*: Answers to Frequently Asked Legal Questions // Congressional Research Service. September 9, 2014. P. 16-19.

<sup>274</sup> Starr-Deelen D.G. Counter-Terrorism from the Obama Administration to President Trump. Palgrave Pivot Cham, 2018. P. 23-26. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-69757-4

<sup>275</sup> Statement by President Trump on Syria // U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Russia. April 6, 2017. URL: <https://ru.usembassy.gov/statement-president-trump-syria/> (accessed: 17.02.2023); Statement by President Trump on Syria // U.S. Department of Defense. April 13, 2018. URL: [https://dod.defense.gov/portals/1/features/2018/0418\\_syria/img/statement-by-president-trump-on-syria.pdf](https://dod.defense.gov/portals/1/features/2018/0418_syria/img/statement-by-president-trump-on-syria.pdf) (accessed: 17.02.2023)

<sup>276</sup> Talmon S. The United States under President Trump: Gravedigger of International Law // Chinese Journal of International Law. 2019, Vol. 17. P. 658-659. DOI: 10.1093/chinesejil/jmz023; Krishnan S. The Alleged Use of Chemical

public debate, as rightly noted by constitutional law professor Julian Ku, mainly discussed “their legitimacy under the US Constitution.”<sup>277</sup>

Finally, the actions of the Biden administration, namely, attacks on Iranian and pro-Iranian militias in Syria, also deserve consideration. The president, in his letter from an international legal point of view, justified these actions by the same Article 51 of the UN Charter, which gives states the right to self-defense<sup>278</sup>, which many experts considered very doubtful<sup>279</sup>.

### Values

The need to disseminate American values in one form or another, which according to American elites claim to be universal, has been one of the central ideas of US foreign policy since the middle of the 20th century. The main tool for this is public diplomacy, carried out (especially during the first Obama administration) based on the ideas of “soft” and “smart power” of Joseph Nye, which were aimed, among other things, at “expanding the number of adherents of American values abroad and engaging the international community to the political agenda proposed by Washington.”<sup>280</sup>

The notorious “American values” themselves are a rather loose and abstract concept, a single definition of which has not yet been developed. E.g., in a special guide prepared in 2017 by the US State Department for Americans traveling abroad, the list of American values looks like this: independence, equality, individualism, democracy, nationalism (!), meritocracy, directness, innovation, consumerism, informality and efficient use of time<sup>281</sup>.

Obviously, for the “international market” the list should be somewhat different. In the Obama-era National Security Strategies, among American values that are “reflective of the universal values we champion all around the world,”<sup>282</sup> one can find freedoms of expression, assembly, religion, and elections; dignity, tolerance, equality of all people and fair justice<sup>283</sup>. It has not changed much in similar

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Weapons Against the Syrian People: Does It Justify Forceful Intervention? // *Jadavpur Journal of International Relations*. 2017, Vol. 21, No. 2. P. 138–159. DOI: 10.1177/0973598417732603

<sup>277</sup> *Ku J.* Trump’s Syria strike clearly broke international law – and no one seems to care // *VOX*. April 19, 2017. URL: <https://www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2017/4/19/15345686/syria-un-strike-illegal-un-humanitarian-law> (accessed: 17.02.2023)

<sup>278</sup> A Letter to the Speaker of the House and President pro tempore of the Senate Consistent with the War Powers Resolution // The White House. February 27, 2021. URL: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/02/27/a-letter-to-the-speaker-of-the-house-and-president-pro-tempore-of-the-senate-consistent-with-the-war-powers-resolution/> (accessed: 17.02.2023); Letter to the Speaker of the House and the President Pro Tempore of the Senate Consistent with the War Powers Resolution (Public Law 93-148) // The White House. June 29, 2021. URL: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/06/29/letter-to-the-speaker-of-the-house-and-the-president-pro-tempore-of-the-senate-consistent-with-the-war-powers-resolution-public-law-93-148/> (accessed: 17.02.2023)

<sup>279</sup> See: *Saxton A.* U.S. Airstrikes in Syria and Iraq: Legal Authorities and Presidential War Powers // *Center for Strategic and International Studies*. July 8, 2021. URL: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-airstrikes-syria-and-iraq-legal-authorities-and-presidential-war-powers> (accessed: 17.02.2023); *O’Meara C.* February 2021 American airstrikes in Syria: necessary and proportionate acts of self-defence or unlawful armed reprisals? // *Journal on the Use of Force and International Law*. 2022, Vol. 9, Issue 1. P. 78-98. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20531702.2022.2029021>

<sup>280</sup> *Tsvetkova N.* The US Public Diplomacy (In Russ.) // *International Processes*. 2015, № 3(42). P. 121.

<sup>281</sup> “So You’re An American?”: A Guide to Answering Difficult Questions Abroad // U.S. Department of State. URL: <https://www.state.gov/courses/answeringdifficultquestions/assets/m/resources/DifficultQuestions-AmericanValues.pdf> (accessed: 18.02.2023)

<sup>282</sup> National Security Strategy. February 2015. P. 20.

<sup>283</sup> National Security Strategy. May 2010. P. 35.

documents of the Trump<sup>284</sup> and Biden administrations (the latter, by the way, actually equated American values with the “values of the UN Charter”<sup>285</sup>).

However, how universal are American values really? Practice shows that they do not fully coincide even with Western European values. According to the Pew Research Center, Western Europeans are much more socially oriented than Americans, less religious, and (at least in 2011) less likely to use force in international relations<sup>286</sup>.

Under these conditions, it is rather difficult to talk about the success of spreading American values in the Middle East. The US hoped to bring about “a shift from radical Islam to more secular, universal values”<sup>287</sup> through the provision of economic aid, education, and various development programs. The United States has spent hundreds of millions of dollars to improve America's image and promote American values in the region, but the results have clearly not matched the resources expended<sup>288</sup>. One of the few truly major successes of US public diplomacy in the region was the bet on the Arab youth, which, propagated by American ideas about freedom and democracy, played a tremendous role during the events of the Arab Spring<sup>289</sup>. Indeed, in the early 2010s the Arab world dreamed of democracy and was even quite loyal to the expansion of women's rights, but with its own specifics – request for a strong economy, which for most countries was still more important than democracy, as well as for the defining or at least guiding role of Islam in the life of society<sup>290</sup>.

However, the results of the Arab Spring itself were ambiguous for Washington: chaos came to the region, and the level of perception of the United States in most Muslim countries not only didn't improve, but on the contrary, it seriously sank, in some places – by 9-11%<sup>291</sup>. The intervention of the United States and its allies in Libya was also negatively perceived – according to a survey conducted by the Gallup Center, in no country in the Arab world did the number of supporters of the intervention exceed the number of its opponents, which on average fluctuated around 50-70%<sup>292</sup>.

The situation continued to worsen in the next years. In 2014, the countries and territories of the region – Egypt, Jordan, Türkiye, the Palestinian Authority, Lebanon and Tunisia – were among the top

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<sup>284</sup> National Security Strategy of the United States of America. December 2017. P. 41.

<sup>285</sup> National Security Strategy. October 2022. P. 23.

<sup>286</sup> The American-Western European Values Gap // Pew Research Center. November 17, 2011. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2011/11/17/the-american-western-european-values-gap/> (accessed: 18.02.2023)

<sup>287</sup> *Savin L.* Moderate Islam or U.S. soft power for Muslims? / *Savin L. (ed.)*. Geopolitics. 2012, Issue XV. P. 42.

<sup>288</sup> *Kubyshkin A., Tsvetkova N.* The US Public Diplomacy. (In Russ.). Moscow: Aspect Press, 2013. P. 167-180.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.* P. 180-190.

<sup>290</sup> Most Muslims Want Democracy, Personal Freedoms, and Islam in Political Life // Pew Research Center. July 10, 2012. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2012/07/10/most-muslims-want-democracy-personal-freedoms-and-islam-in-political-life/> (accessed: 20.02.2023)

<sup>291</sup> Arab Spring Fails to Improve U.S. Image // Pew Research Center. May 17, 2011. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2011/05/17/arab-spring-fails-to-improve-us-image/> (accessed: 18.02.2023)

<sup>292</sup> Snapshot: NATO Intervention in Libya Unpopular in Arab World // Gallup Center. May 31, 2012. URL: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/154997/Snapshot-NATO-Intervention-Libya-Unpopular-Arab-World.aspx> (accessed: 20.02.2023)

US critics<sup>293</sup>. In 2017, the situation worsened even more after the election of Donald Trump, although it is worth noting that the Arabs perceived the inhabitants and the US government differently – almost two-thirds of those polled by the Arab Center Washington DC positively assessed Americans, but almost the same number spoke negatively about Washington foreign policy<sup>294</sup>. As noted by senior researcher at the Institute for the USA and Canada of the Russian Academy of Sciences Inna V. Shumilina, “the effect of cultural and ideological influence on the minds of people in Arab countries invariably remains secondary to their perception of specific US actions in the Middle East,” while “the latter are most often perceived negatively there, nullifying the efforts of American PR.”<sup>295</sup>

Gradually, American public diplomacy programs in the Middle East began to wind down. This, against the backdrop of a further deterioration in the situation in the region after the rise and fall of the Arab Spring, immediately affected the attitude of the people of the region towards American values. Thus, according to the latest Arab Barometer poll, seven out of nine Arab countries participating in the study associate democracy with poor economic governance and indecision, and six out of nine with the inability to maintain order and stability<sup>296</sup>. Thus, the key value promoted by the United States as universal in the early 2020s no longer finds much support in the Middle East.

In conclusion, we would like to note one more rather indicative fact, which testifies to the decline in trust in the United States and American values in the world. One of the largest American public opinion research centers, Pew Research Center, since 2002, annually measures the attitude towards the United States among the citizens of different countries around the world. But if before 2019, polls were conducted in a more diverse environment, then starting in 2020, polls are being conducted in only 16 countries that are allies of the United States<sup>297</sup>. In our opinion, this indicates nothing more than an unwillingness to make public a significant drop in US ratings, and hence American values, in countries outside the circle of its allies.

### **Geopolitics**

From a geographical point of view, Syria is located in the very heart of the Middle East, which, in turn, is located at the intersection of three continents and divides in half the so-called Rimland – a geopolitical arc, which is, according to one of the most famous American geopoliticians Nicholas

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<sup>293</sup> Which countries don't like America and which do // Pew Research Center. July 15, 2014. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/07/15/which-countries-dont-like-america-and-which-do/> (accessed: 18.02.2023)

<sup>294</sup> Arab Attitudes toward President Trump and his Middle East Policies and Positions // Arab Center Washington DC. October 27, 2017. URL: <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/arabs-opinion-trump-oct-2017/> (accessed: 18.02.2023)

<sup>295</sup> *Shumilina I.* Calculations and miscalculations of Barack Obama's “soft power” in the Middle East // RIAC. December 4, 2012. URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/raschety-i-proschety-myagkoy-sily-baraka-obamy-na-blizhnem-v/> (accessed: 18.02.2023)

<sup>296</sup> Democracy in the Middle East & North Africa // Arab Barometer. July 2022. URL: [https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABVII\\_Governance\\_Report-EN-1.pdf](https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABVII_Governance_Report-EN-1.pdf) (accessed: 18.02.2023)

<sup>297</sup> Opinion of the United States / Global Indicators Database // Pew Research Center. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/database/indicator/1> (accessed: 18.02.2023)

Spykman, of fundamental importance for the strategic interests of the United States.<sup>298</sup> Not surprisingly, since the beginning of its independent history, Syria has been seen as “a land destined to always attract the attention of the West” and “a prize for rival great powers for all time.”<sup>299</sup> In addition, Syria also has an important ideological significance: its capital, Damascus, was the center of the famous Umayyad Caliphate, which stretched from India and Central Asia to Spain, and also one of the centers of Arab nationalism.<sup>300</sup>

The geopolitical position of Syria, on the one hand, is very advantageous, on the other hand, after the collapse of the socialist camp, it began to present many problems for Damascus. Surrounded on all sides by powerful states – Türkiye in the north, Iraq in the east, Jordan in the southeast and Israel in the south – while having unstable and demanding Lebanon in the southwest and being geographically cut off from its main allies, Russia and Iran, Syria could not but perceive itself as a “besieged fortress”, the last stronghold of pan-Arab socialism in the Middle East.<sup>301</sup>

To some extent, this perception really reflected the existing reality. Despite the relatively good relations of Syria with the countries of the region (except perhaps Israel) and repeated attempts to establish contacts with the United States, which was an ally and patron of almost all of Syria's neighbors, the regime in Damascus in the 1990-2000s was still perceived by them as an alien element and a relic of the Cold War, which inevitably had to change or even fall under the influence of the West.

However, the Syrian leadership has been relatively successful in pursuing a multi-vector policy. With one hand, it introduced various indulgences inside the country and slightly opened the country for cooperation outside, and on the other hand, it didn't completely unwind the screws and successfully established ties with Iran, the main geopolitical rival of the United States in the region.

All this, of course, had nothing to do with the strategic interests of the United States in the Middle East, which were quite accurately put by President Barack Obama in his big speech of May 19, 2011. This speech was entirely devoted to changes in the region, “the forces that are driving it and how we can respond in a way that advances our values and strengthens our security.”<sup>302</sup>

According to Obama, US interests in the region have not changed in the previous years and decades: fighting terrorism, preventing the spread of nuclear weapons, ensuring free trade, maintaining the security of the region, as well as upholding the security of Israel and achieving peace between Arabs and

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<sup>298</sup> *Spykman N.J.* The Geography of Peace. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company. 1944. 66 p.

<sup>299</sup> *Roucek J.S.* Syria: A Lesson in Geopolitics // *Current History*. 1952, Vol. 22, No. 128. P. 221-226.

<sup>300</sup> *Aftandilian G.* A Security Role for the United States in a Post-ISIS\* Syria? Challenges and Opportunities for U.S. Policy // *Strategic Studies Institute*. September 2018. P. 2-3 (with \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked)

<sup>301</sup> *Goujon R.* The Geopolitics of the Syrian Civil War // *Stratfor*. August 4, 2015. URL: <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/geopolitics-syrian-civil-war> (accessed: 23.02.2023)

<sup>302</sup> Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa // *The White House*. May 19, 2011. URL: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-middle-east-and-north-africa> (accessed: 11.01.2023)

Israelis. In this regard, it is not surprising that as in the “heart of the Middle East” in Syria all the above interests were reflected to one degree or another.

*War on Terrorism.* As was noted above, since 1979 Syria has been officially included in the US so-called State Sponsors of Terrorism list. According to the US State Department's latest “pre-war” report on terrorism for 2009, released in August 2010, Syria continued to support groups designated by the United States as terrorist groups such as Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and Hezbollah. The report also noted the vulnerability of the Syrian financial sector, where about 70% of transactions have so far been carried out in cash, and the “black market” was considered almost equal in volume to the official economy of the country, to sponsoring terrorism. This raised “serious fears that the Syrian government and business elite could be involved in terrorist financing schemes.”<sup>303</sup>

*Nuclear non-proliferation.* Operation Orchard, during which the alleged Syrian nuclear reactor was destroyed by the Israeli Air Force in the province of Deir-ez-Zor in September 2007, by 2011 should have still been remembered by politicians in Washington, especially given the rather high the level of US awareness and involvement in this issue. This fact is revealed in the memoirs of the then US President George W. Bush<sup>304</sup>.

It should be noted, however, that Bush's own position on this score was quite ambiguous. On the one hand, before the strike, he was not so sure that this was a military nuclear program, and therefore did not follow the lead of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who insisted that the United States stroke themselves. On the other hand, Damascus's hasty attempts to sweep the incident under the carpet became for him (and for the United States as a whole) a clear confirmation that Syrian nuclear program did exist. Thus, even the intensified cooperation between Syria and the IAEA in the field of the peaceful nuclear development<sup>305</sup> was hardly sufficient confirmation for the White House that Damascus had finally abandoned plans to obtain a nuclear bomb.

There is one more interesting fact. When President Bush listed the possible options for action that were considered then in the NSS, the third option was considered “exposing the duplicity of the regime” and as a result “use leverage to press on Syria to end its support for terror and meddling in Lebanon and Iraq.”<sup>306</sup> In our opinion, this is quite clear evidence that the Syrian nuclear program itself was not fully regarded by the United States as a threat. Much more interesting for Washington was to use possible violations of the nuclear non-proliferation regime by Syria for political blackmail.

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<sup>303</sup> Country Reports on Terrorism 2009 // U.S. Department of State. August 2010. P. 194-196. URL: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/141114.pdf> (accessed 11.01.2023)

<sup>304</sup> *Bush G.W.* Decision Points. New York: Crown. 2010. P. 421-422.

<sup>305</sup> Frolov A. Nuclear programs in the Middle East: development cannot be curtailed. Part 1. Origin and development (In Russ.) // Pathways to Peace and Security. 2018, №2 (55). P. 98.

<sup>306</sup> *Bush G.W.* Decision Points... P. 421.



*Ensuring freedom of trade.* Free trade in the Syrian context can be seen as freedom to transport hydrocarbons, the treasure of the Middle East, and control over which was and still is of fundamental importance to the United States. In this case, we are talking about the infamous project of the Qatari-Turkish gas pipeline to Europe, around the significance of which, including for unleashing the Syrian conflict, many copies have been broken.

One of the main supporters of the version that the Syrian Civil War began precisely because Bashar al-Assad rejected the Qatari-Turkish project and instead decided to join the Iranian Islamic pipeline project is Robert Kennedy Jr., who revealed this issue in a number of his articles based, among other things, on declassified data from WikiLeaks.<sup>307</sup> Based on the data he has, he claims that the intelligence agencies of the United States and their Middle Eastern allies actively cooperated on the promotion of the Qatari project, being interested in depriving Europe of dependence on Russian oil and natural gas. Despite the fact that this theory is often criticized<sup>308</sup>, the gas factor may not have been decisive in shaping US Syrian policy at the initial stage of the war, but it most likely played a role in increasing Washington's interest in regime change in Damascus.

*Maintaining the security of the region.* As G. Somar rightly notes in his dissertation, the United States remains committed to “an approach according to which almost any significant conflict is classified as a sphere of American interests”, thanks to which “Washington acts in a similar vein, shifting the dynamics of events to a trajectory that is beneficial to it.”<sup>309</sup> The Syrian conflict could not be an exception to this unwritten rule, primarily due to the Iranian factor. As we mentioned earlier, Syria was the first to recognize the results of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, and then one of the entire Arab world sided with Tehran in the Iran-Iraq war. Syria became a full-fledged ally of Iran after the Twelver Shiites, who constituted the overwhelming majority of the population of the Islamic Republic, recognized the Alawite sect (to which the Assad clan also belonged) as a branch of Shiism, which became “one of the key factors in the SAR's rapprochement with IRI.”<sup>310</sup> Ties between Tehran and Damascus were strengthening, and Syria became Iran's main ally in the region, its “land bridge” to the Mediterranean and link to the Lebanese Hezbollah.<sup>311</sup>

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<sup>307</sup> See: *Kennedy Jr. R.F.* Why the Arabs Don't Want...; *Kennedy Jr. R.F.* Syria: Another Pipeline War // EcoWatch. February 25, 2016. URL: <https://www.ecowatch.com/syria-another-pipeline-war-1882180532.html> (accessed: 12.01.2023)

<sup>308</sup> See: *Nikiforov O.* How real is the gas underpinning of the Syrian conflict (In Russ.) // *Nezavisimaya gazeta*. March 20, 2020. URL: [https://www.ng.ru/ng\\_energiya/2018-03-20/15\\_7193\\_siria.html](https://www.ng.ru/ng_energiya/2018-03-20/15_7193_siria.html) (accessed: 12.01.2023); *Cochrane P.* The 'Pipelineistan' conspiracy: The war in Syria has never been about gas // *Middle East Eye*. April 16, 2018. URL: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/big-story/pipelineistan-conspiracy-war-syria-has-never-been-about-gas> (accessed: 12.01.2023)

<sup>309</sup> *Somar G.* Syrian conflict in the context of regional international relations in the Middle East (2011-2021). Dissertation submitted for the degree of Candidate of Historical Sciences. Moscow, 2021. P. 78.

<sup>310</sup> *Akhmedov V.* The Syrian Crisis and Iran's Struggle for the Middle East (1990–2020s). Moscow: Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 2022. P. 23.

<sup>311</sup> *Badran T.* Strategic Geography Of The Middle East // Hoover Institution. June 27, 2019. URL: <https://www.hoover.org/research/strategic-geography-middle-east> (accessed: 23.02.2023)

However, this development of events ran counter to the interests of the United States and its Middle Eastern allies – Israel and the monarchies of the Persian Gulf. The anti-Zionist nature of the Iranian regime and the prospect of the imminent appearance of Iranian forces on its borders terrified Tel Aviv, while Iran's clear claim to dominance in the Islamic world worried the ruling dynasties in Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, Doha and Amman. By ruling elites in Washington all of this combined was seen as trends undermining the existing Middle East security architecture, which at that time was profitable for the United States. Based on this, the collapse of the Syrian regime automatically turned into a blow to the regime in Tehran<sup>312</sup>.

*Security of Israel and peace between Arabs and Israelis.* The American-Israeli alliance has been a de facto “constant of the US foreign policy strategy”<sup>313</sup> for decades, tempered by many years of Arab-Israeli wars. However, the loss of the Golan Heights, which was the result of Syria's participation in the Six Day War in 1967, turned into an irritant in Syrian-Israeli relations, spreading to US-Syrian relations as well. Syria provided assistance to Palestinian militants even before 1979, and after the victory of the Islamic Revolution, it began to support the Shiite Hezbollah in Lebanon. For Israel and the United States, this development of events was unacceptable.

As for the Arab-Israeli peace, this is perhaps the only direction in which the regime change in Damascus had every chance of being unprofitable for both Israel and the United States. The fact is that the Sunni majority regime in Syria (as subsequent events showed) would hardly be as secular as the Alawite Baathist regime of Bashar al-Assad, which, in turn, would significantly increase the chances of resuming the Syrian-Israeli conflict at least over the Golan Heights.<sup>314</sup>

Thus, at the beginning of the conflict, the United States had certain geopolitical interests in Syria. However, almost all of them were aimed at backing their allies in the region. Israel was troubled by the fact that Syria supports Palestinian groups, and Israel and the Gulf monarchies were disgusted by Damascus's too close cooperation with Tehran. All this, at the same time, was not in the interests of the US either, since it undermined the system of international relations that had developed in the Middle East.

Over time, the Syrian conflict has evolved in two directions. On the one hand, it acquired more and more new geopolitical dimensions, attracting new players and contributing to the creation of the most incredible combinations and alliances between them. On the other hand, as a consequence of this, Syria has increasingly become “a key theatre for the foreign-policy ambitions of international and regional

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<sup>312</sup> Kuznetsov A. On the impact of Shiite-Sunni contradictions on the situation in the Middle East // Bulletin of MGIMO-University. 2014, №3. P. 151.

<sup>313</sup> Golubev D. Order, Chaos, and the Clash of Systemic Powers: Key Dilemmas of US Policy in the Middle East // Shiryaev B., Leksyutina Ya., Bogdanov A. [eds.]. Challenges and Dilemmas of US Foreign Policy at the Beginning of the 21st Century: Regional Aspects. St Petersburg: Skifiya-print, 2014. P. 34.

<sup>314</sup> Kenner D. No Matter Who Wins the Syrian Civil War, Israel Loses // The Atlantic. August 29, 2018. URL: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/08/israel-gamble-assad-syria/568693/> (accessed: 26.02.2023)

state actors, who are pursuing goals that extend beyond Syria.”<sup>315</sup> Under these circumstances, for the United States, the Syrian conflict has transformed from an independent problem into a “grey-zone”<sup>316</sup> in which they had to confront their geopolitical opponents and protect the interests of their allies.

One of the first new layers of the conflict was the diplomatic confrontation between the United States and its allies with Russia and China in the UN Security Council, where the latter blocked any anti-Syrian draft resolutions. As early as 2012, there were talks about “the formation of a new coalition between Iran, Russia and China, opposing the United States, the EU, Saudi Arabia, Israel and Qatar.”<sup>317</sup>

Further, in 2013-2014 a new layer has emerged in Syria that has challenged all parties to the conflict – international terrorism. The threat that arose first from the Al-Qaeda\*<sup>318</sup> branch in Syria, and then from the Islamic State\* fell into the outline of the War on Terror declared by the United States after the events of 9/11. It is important to note that the actions of these groups threatened national security not only of the US allies, but also of the US itself: one might just recall the terrorist attacks in San Bernardino and Orlando.<sup>319</sup> In such conditions, it was objectively vital for the United States to deal with this threat as soon as possible, without sacrificing it to geopolitical intrigues.

In 2015, Russia also launched its military operation against ISIS\* in the country, which moved the confrontation between the United States and Russia over Syria from the category of diplomatic to the category of indirect military confrontations. Moscow decided to return to the Middle East in order to reassert its influence in the region when Bashar al-Assad asked his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin for help in fighting IS\* under the Soviet-Syrian treaty of 1980. In other circumstances, the US might have looked at it more favorably and even, perhaps, start mutually beneficial cooperation in the fight against international terrorism, but after the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, that just became another source of tension in Russian-American relations. Retired members of the Obama administration, for example, did not hide the fact that “preventing the strengthening of Russia in the region, in the world” was one of the most important tasks of the United States.<sup>320</sup> Moscow's policy aimed at undermining American influence in the region and saving the Assad regime has faced active opposition from the United States, which spent so much effort to overthrow the Syrian president.

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<sup>315</sup> *Petrini B., Fischer M., Hokayem E.* The civil war in Syria: an intractable conflict with geopolitical implications // The International Institute for Strategic Studies. December 14, 2021. URL: <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2021/12/the-civil-war-in-syria-an-intractable-conflict-with-geopolitical-implications> (accessed: 23.02.2023)

<sup>316</sup> *Abhyankar R.M.* Syria: The Tragedy of a Pivotal State. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. P. 129. DOI: 10.1007/978-981-15-4562-7

<sup>317</sup> *Barzegar K.* A Turning Point in the Middle East Geopolitics // Russia in Global Affairs. 2012, No. 2. URL: <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/a-turning-point-in-the-middle-east-geopolitics/> (accessed: 23.02.2023)

<sup>318</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>319</sup> Presidential Memorandum Plan to Defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria\* // The White House. January 28, 2017. URL: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/presidential-actions/presidential-memorandum-plan-defeat-islamic-state-iraq-syria/> \* (accessed: 26.02.2023)

<sup>320</sup> *Suchkov M.* The problem of settlement in Syria in relations between Russia and the United States // *Shakleina T. [ed.]* Russia and the USA in the XXI century. Relationship features. Moscow; Aspect-press Publishing House, 2020. P. 187.

In parallel with this, the United States began to have problems in relations with its own allies, primarily with Türkiye. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan was not impressed by the close cooperation of the United States with the Kurds in Syria, who were closely associated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), recognized as a terrorist organization not only in Türkiye, but also in the United States. Despite Washington's efforts to somehow mitigate the conflict, Türkiye began to interact more closely with Russia and began its military operations in northern Syria<sup>321</sup>. Such a behavior by Türkiye, which plays an important role as a support for NATO in the region, was perceived extremely painfully in the United States, so they began to make efforts to return Türkiye to a pro-Western policy.

Following Türkiye, the monarchies of the Persian Gulf began to gradually change their position. The first bells of upcoming changes rang back in 2013, when Riyadh expressed dissatisfaction with the too soft and indecisive US policy during the crisis around the Syrian chemical weapons<sup>322</sup>, as well as, in principle, insufficiently active involvement in Syrian affairs due to unwillingness to disrupt the negotiations on the “nuclear deal” with Iran<sup>323</sup>. In addition, the Gulf monarchies and the United States nevertheless saw the outcome of the civil war in Syria in different ways: while Riyadh and Doha sought to bring Islamic fundamentalists who were close to them in spirit and ideology to power in Damascus, Washington was more interested in a secular government that would have been ready, if not to negotiate with Israel, then at least to abandon the idea of opposing it<sup>324</sup>. Apparently, the Arab countries, following Saudi Arabia, drew their own conclusions from the rather indecisive and inconsistent US policy in Syria and, on the contrary, the strong support of Assad by Russia and Iran, coming to the conclusion that the Syrian president will still be able to remain standing. As a result, since 2019, the Gulf countries have stepped up efforts to gradually restore relations with the government in Damascus, which clearly ran counter to Washington's plans.

### 1.2.3. U.S. Domestic Policy Variables

The final paragraph will deal with the so-called intervening or domestic policy variables, which “condition whether and how states respond to the international systemic pressures that all realists assume underlie foreign policy, grand strategy, and international politics.”<sup>325</sup> There are four such variables: leaders' images, state-society relations, strategic culture and bureaucracy.

<sup>321</sup> *Evseenko A.* US and Kurds... (In Russ.). URL: <https://rusus.jes.su/s207054760005315-3-1> (accessed: 05.03.2020)

<sup>322</sup> *Podraza A.* Geopolitical and Strategic Causes and Implications of the Syrian Civil War and the Refugee Crisis // *Nação e Defesa*. 2018, No. 149. P. 80.

<sup>323</sup> *Goujon R.* The Geopolitics of the Syrian... URL: <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/geopolitics-syrian-civil-war> (accessed: 23.02.2023)

<sup>324</sup> *Jamal V., Kuznetsov A.* The geopolitical dimension of the Syrian conflict // *Bulletin of the Peoples' Friendship University of Russia. International Relations Series*. 2016, №3. P. 467.

<sup>325</sup> *Ripsman N.M., Taliaferro J.W., Lobell S.E.* Neoclassical Realist Theory... P. 58.

## Image of U.S. President

The first US president to deal with the Syrian conflict was Barack Obama. The 44th American president came to the White House literally on a wave of criticism of the foreign policy of his predecessor, George W. Bush. Moreover, it was precisely his Middle East policy that was subjected to the fiercest criticism.

Talking about the foreign policy views, ideas and attitudes of the first black US president is both simple and difficult at the same time. On the one hand, the notorious term “Obama Doctrine” appeared almost immediately after the beginning of his presidency<sup>326</sup>, and later became widespread among scientists and journalists<sup>327</sup>. On the other hand, the Obama Doctrine basically existed only in the minds of scholars, analysts and political observers. Despite the fact that over time, Obama himself began to use this term<sup>328</sup>, no specific foreign policy doctrine was formulated during his presidency. Accordingly, Obama's foreign policy researchers themselves also invest different meanings in understanding this very “doctrine”. Fortunately, its main characteristics look quite similar, and the differences begin mainly at the low-level.

The basis of Barack Obama's foreign policy views can be called “pragmatic idealism” or “pragmatic liberalism.” E. J. Dionne Jr., who was one of the first to use the Obama Doctrine term, described it as “a form of realism unafraid to deploy American power but mindful that its use must be tempered by practical limits and a dose of self-awareness.”<sup>329</sup> Martin Indyk, Kenneth Lieberthal, and Michael O'Hanlon call Obama a “progressive pragmatist” who tried to “reconcile the president's lofty vision with his innate realism and political caution.”<sup>330</sup>

Another distinct feature of Barack Obama's foreign policy style is his desire for multilateral action. His focus on building new and strengthening old alliances was reflected in most of his campaign speeches on foreign affairs. In his first keynote foreign policy speech, Obama named “building and strengthening the partnerships and alliances necessary to meet our common challenges and defeat our common threats” as one of the five ways “America will begin to lead again when I'm President.”<sup>331</sup>

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<sup>326</sup> *Dionne Jr E.J.* The Obama Doctrine in Action // The Washington Post. April 16, 2009. URL: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/04/15/AR2009041502902.html> (accessed: 13.01.2023)

<sup>327</sup> See: *Rohde D.* The Obama Doctrine // Foreign Policy. February 27, 2012. URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/02/27/the-obama-doctrine/> (accessed: 13.01.2023); *Cordesman A.H.* Is there an Obama Doctrine? // CSIS. March 10, 2016. URL: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/there-obama-doctrine> (accessed: 13.01.2023); *Goldberg J.* The Obama Doctrine // The Atlantic. April 2016. URL: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/> (accessed: 13.01.2023)

<sup>328</sup> *Friedman T.L.* Iran and the Obama Doctrine // The New York Times. April 5, 2015. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/06/opinion/thomas-friedman-the-obama-doctrine-and-iran-interview.html> (accessed: 13.01.2023)

<sup>329</sup> *E.J. Dionne Jr.* The Obama Doctrine...

<sup>330</sup> *Indyk M., Lieberthal K., O'Hanlon M.* Scoring Obama's Foreign Policy // Foreign Affairs. 2012, Vol. 91, No. 3. P. 30.

<sup>331</sup> Remarks to the Chicago Council on Global Affairs // The American Presidency Project. April 23, 2007. URL: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-chicago-council-global-affairs> (accessed: 13.01.2023)

Some researchers name as one more basis for Obama's foreign policy views the philosophy of Reinhold Niebuhr, the author of the concept of “Christian realism.”<sup>332</sup> According to Matt Gobusch, Obama “applied Niebuhr’s philosophy to American foreign policy by positioning multilateralism at the fulcrum of the scale balancing idealism and realism.” In addition, the concept of “just war”, which was also one of the central concepts in Niebuhr's “Christian realism”, was of great importance to him<sup>333</sup>.

Finally, it is worth noting Obama's views on the Middle East, the Muslim world and US policy in this region. Without a doubt, Obama most fully expressed the essence of his planned Middle East policy in his famous Cairo speech “A New Beginning”, delivered on June 4, 2009. During his speech, the American president called for a new era in relations between the United States and the Islamic world, and touched upon a variety of topics, including noting that “events in Iraq have reminded America of the need to use diplomacy and build international consensus to resolve our problems whenever possible”, announcing the withdrawal of troops from Iraq by 2012 and literally admitting Washington's involvement in the overthrow of government of Mohammed Mossadegh in 1953.

In the context of the issues considered in this paper, it is important to pay attention to the ending of the speech dedicated to human rights issues. While Obama noted that “no system of government can or should be imposed by one nation by any other”, he nevertheless added that he believes that “all people yearn for certain things: the ability to speak your mind and have a say in how you are governed; confidence in the rule of law and the equal administration of justice; government that is transparent and doesn't steal from the people; the freedom to live as you choose.” He also added that “those are not just American ideas, they are human rights, and that is why we will support them everywhere”, and also that “suppressing ideas never succeeds in making them go away.”<sup>334</sup> Thus, the concept of humanitarian intervention did not completely disappear but was only repackaged in a new way – as a warning to the ruling regimes of the Middle East, and as a kind of “beacon of hope” for the people of the region.

In addition, I would like to pay particular attention to the evolution of Barack Obama's position in relation to humanitarian interventions. Even at the beginning of his presidential race, he stated that the US could not use its troops to solve humanitarian problems around the world, and that the risks that bloodshed in Iraq would only intensify if the US maintained its military presence there.<sup>335</sup> However, a year later, as a full-fledged Democratic presidential candidate, Obama placed the emphasis somewhat differently. During a presidential debate with his Republican counterpart John McCain, he noted that

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<sup>332</sup> See: *Brooks D.* Obama, Gospel and Verse // The New York Times. April 26, 2007. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/26/opinion/26brooks.html> (accessed: 13.01.2023); *Holder R.W., Josephson P.B.* Obama's Niebuhr Problem // Church History. 2013, Vol. 82, No. 3. P. 678-687.

<sup>333</sup> *Gobush M.* Moral Multilateralism: The Obama Doctrine’s Christian Realism // Providence. July 25, 2016. URL: <https://providencemag.com/2016/07/moral-multilateralism-obama-doctrine-christian-realism/> (accessed: 13.01.2023)

<sup>334</sup> President Obama's Speech in Cairo: A New Beginning // The White House. URL: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/NewBeginning/transcripts> (accessed: 06.04.2023)

<sup>335</sup> Obama: Don't Stay In Iraq Over Genocide // CBS News. July 20, 2007. URL: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/obama-dont-stay-in-iraq-over-genocide/> (accessed: 16.01.2023)

“we may not always have national security issues at stake, but we have moral issues at stake” and that the US “have to consider it as part of... our national interests in intervening where possible.”<sup>336</sup>

Summing up, we can say that the Obama doctrine consisted of attempts to balance between liberal interventionism, which requires to interfere in the internal affairs of countries around the world for “humanitarian” reasons as actively as possible, and the pragmatic observance of the national interests of the United States and the comparison of their forces and opportunities. The same was true of Obama's policy towards the Middle East, where the proposal to “start all over” was combined with a willingness to intervene in the affairs of the region by military means, except now – as part of a larger “coalition of the willing.”

Donald Trump, Barack Obama's successor as President of the United States, was a stark contrast to both his predecessor and his protégé, Hillary Clinton. The emotionally unstable and authoritarian-prone successful businessman and showman, who did not even have minimal political experience, was about to radically change the White House's approach to the Syrian conflict.<sup>337</sup>

Trump's first comments on the Syrian events appeared back in 2011. In May 2013, the businessman accused the then president of supporting the “Islamists from al-Qaeda\*<sup>338</sup>” by introducing a no-fly zone in Syria. In the midst of the crisis over the chemical attack in Ghouta, when the possibility of launching missile attacks on Syria was directly discussed in the White House, Donald Trump for the first time openly stated that the United States had no special interests in Syria. He tried to prove to “our very stupid leader”, by whom President Obama was meant, that strikes on Syria “will not bring the United States anything but problems”, and also warned him about the danger of “hitting the wrong targets and killing civilians.” The businessman dubbed most of the Syrian rebels nothing more than “radical jihadists”, and helping them was clearly not among the national interests of the United States. In addition, it is important to note that, according to Trump, in order to carry out such strikes, the president needed “congressional approval.”

Since the start of his campaign, Trump has returned to criticizing the Obama administration's Syrian policy. He took the position that “interfering in the affairs of others, trying to teach those who have been subject to dictators for hundreds of years how they should properly manage their states, 'does not work’”<sup>339</sup>. A year before the election and shortly after the start of the Russian Aerospace Forces operation, Trump suddenly declared that “if Putin wants to destroy ISIS\*, I am 100% for it, and I don't

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<sup>336</sup> Presidential debate transcript, Oct. 7, 2008 // NBC News. October 8, 2008. URL: <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna27073997> (accessed: 16.01.2023)

<sup>337</sup> Lynch M. Belligerent Minimalism: The Trump Administration and the Middle East // *The Washington Quarterly*. 2016, Vol. 39, No.4. P. 140. DOI: 10.1080/0163660X.2016.1263920

<sup>338</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>339</sup> Samuilov S. Donald Trump's Foreign Policy: Campaign Promises, Contradictory Steps, Threat of Impeachment (In Russ.) // *USA & Canada: Economics, Politics, Culture*. 2017. №8. P. 29.

understand how anyone can be against it.”<sup>340</sup> Trump continued to adhere to a similar position in February 2016, saying that he “likes the way Russia is hitting ISIS\*<sup>341</sup>” and he believes that it “should continue to do this.”<sup>342</sup> However, a few days later he criticized the draft ceasefire in Syria, while blaming the Syrian authorities and the opposition. Trump also noted that the United States with Russia can “do anything, but no one else does not comply.”<sup>343</sup>

As the election approached, Donald Trump began not only to criticize Obama's Syrian policy, but also began to formulate the foundations of his future Syrian policy. So, for example, he promised to abandon the policy of regime change in Damascus, arguing that the United States has “problems more important than Assad,” including the Islamic State\*, which Trump promised to “knock out”<sup>344</sup>. However, at the same time, the presidential candidate described Bashar al-Assad as a “bad man” who did “terrible things”<sup>345</sup> and also accused Russia of violating the ceasefire agreements in Syria and disrespecting the American authorities.<sup>346</sup>

Trump's other proposals for Syria included the creation of so-called “safe zones”. It is interesting that, in his opinion, the countries of the Persian Gulf should have paid for the creation of these zones.<sup>347</sup> This idea was fully in line with his promise to reduce the extent of the US presence in the Middle East, concentrate his efforts on fighting ISIS\*, and left overboard all other goals and objectives, such as changing objectionable regimes and nation-building. It is interesting to note that in terms of methods, the proposal for “safe zones” was somewhat reminiscent of his threat to build a “Mexican wall” at the expense of Mexico itself.

In summary, Trump's views on Syria have been rather mixed. At first glance, he sought to completely rethink the Obama administration's Syrian course by abandoning the aim to overthrow the Assad government, focusing on the fight against ISIS\*, working with Russia in this regard. On the other hand, the 45th POTUS did not completely abandon criticism of the policies of Damascus and Moscow, and Tehran in particular, in relation to which his position was much tougher than that of Obama (it is not a coincidence that the problem of “Iranian expansion” tops the list of problems in the Middle East in

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<sup>340</sup> Trump endorses Putin's intervention in Syria // Vox. November 11, 2015. URL: <https://www.vox.com/2015/11/10/9710334/trump-putin-isis> (accessed: 28.02.2020)

<sup>341</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>342</sup> Triumphant Donald Trump: “I can change the game” // CBS News. February 10, 2016. URL: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/donald-trump-lays-out-post-new-hampshire-strategy-foreign-policy-positions/> (accessed: 28.02.2020)

<sup>343</sup> Trump and Cruz skeptical of Syria ceasefire (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. February 26, 2016. URL: <https://ria.ru/20160226/1380608480.html> (accessed: 28.02.2020)

<sup>344</sup> Gass N. Trump pledges to hit Islamic State\*, not Assad // Politico. May 20, 2016. URL: <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/05/trump-islamic-state-syria-223399> \* (accessed: 28.02.2020)

<sup>345</sup> Trump says Assad's withdrawal is less important than fighting ISIS\* (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. July 21, 2016. URL: <https://ria.ru/20160721/1472468126.html> (accessed: 28.02.2020)

<sup>346</sup> Trump and his running mate criticized Russia because of Syria (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. October 5, 2016. URL: <https://ria.ru/20161005/1478526919.html> (accessed: 29.02.2020)

<sup>347</sup> Trump proposes to create “safe zones” in Syria (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. August 2, 2016. URL: <https://ria.ru/20160802/1473445816.html> (accessed: 28.02.2020)



Trump's NSS<sup>348</sup>). In addition, Trump was determined to continue Obama's "pivot to the East", only in a more radical form. This explosive combination of opposing positions, inconsistency in actions and heightened emotionality has turned Trump into one of the most significant factors in the formation and implementation of the Syrian policy of the United States.

From Donald Trump, the difficult legacy of the Syrian conflict was passed down to his successor, the 46th US President, Joseph (Joe) Biden. The track record of the new owner of the White House was certainly impressive. First elected to the Senate at age 30 and by this becoming the youngest US senator in post-war US history, Biden is now the oldest newly elected US president.

For more than thirty years, Biden was a member of the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, and since 1997 led the Democratic faction there, which makes him more than savvy in the foreign policy sphere<sup>349</sup>. Nevertheless, it is impossible not to recall Biden's already famous characterization coming from the US Secretary of Defense in 2006-2011 Robert Gates, who claimed that he "has been wrong on nearly every major foreign policy and national security issue over the past four decades."<sup>350</sup> At the same time, one should not forget that Gates and Biden were representatives of different parties, which makes the statement of the former somewhat subjective.

In terms of foreign policy views, Biden is most often ranked among the typical liberal internationalists<sup>351</sup>. On the other hand, a number of authors note that he "talks like a liberal internationalist, but walks with the gait of a realist"<sup>352</sup> and "combines the moral guidelines of a liberal internationalist with a realist skepticism in relation to grandiose interventionist plans."<sup>353</sup> So, Biden advocated for active military actions by the US and NATO in the Balkans in the 1990s, but at the same time opposed the Gulf War, sought to preserve the possibility of a diplomatic settlement of the situation in Iraq in 2002-2003<sup>354</sup>, and also reacted negatively to the idea of intervention in Libya in 2011, allegedly foreseeing subsequent disintegration processes in the country and its transformation into a "Petri dish for the growth of extremism."<sup>355</sup>

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<sup>348</sup> National Security Strategy of... P. 48.

<sup>349</sup> *Samuilov S.* On the personnel and features of the Democratic foreign policy team (In Russ.) // USA & Canada: Economics, Politics, Culture. 2021, №5. P. 27-28. DOI: 10.31857/S268667300014781-9

<sup>350</sup> *Gates R.* Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War. New York: Vintage Books, 2015. P. 288.

<sup>351</sup> See, e.g.: *Gordon M.R.* In Biden, Obama chooses a foreign policy adherent of diplomacy before force // The New York Times. August 24, 2008. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/24/world/americas/24iht-policy.4.15591832.html> (accessed: 10.02.2023); *Colby E.* Biden's global, muscular liberalism is an indefensible foreign policy in 2021 // The Washington Post. March 21, 2021. URL: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/03/21/bidens-global-muscular-liberalism-is-an-indefensible-foreign-policy-2021/> (accessed: 10.02.2023)

<sup>352</sup> *Hadar L.* Joe Biden, foreign policy realist // The Spectator. December 20, 2021. URL: <https://thespectator.com/topic/time-for-joe-biden-foreign-policy-realist/> (accessed: 10.02.2023)

<sup>353</sup> *Hurlburt H.* Joe Biden's Foreign Policy Is All About Relationships // Foreign Policy. January 15, 2021. URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/15/joe-biden-foreign-policy-relationships-united-states/> (accessed: 10.02.2023)

<sup>354</sup> *Richter P., Levey N.N.* On foreign policy, he's willing to go his own way // Los Angeles Times. August 24, 2008. URL: <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2008-aug-24-na-foreignpol24-story.html> (accessed: 10.02.2023)

<sup>355</sup> *Gass N.* Biden: I was right about Libya // Politico. June 21, 2016. URL: <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/06/joe-biden-libya-wrong-224595> (accessed: 10.02.2023)

The results of a survey conducted at the end of 2019 by The New York Times are also rather indicative. At that time just as one of the many candidates from the Democratic Party, Joe Biden advocated the use of military force to protect the US and its allies, to protect oil resources, and also in supported the idea of “humanitarian intervention”, calling it the “moral duty and security interest” of the United States, while emphasizing the need to act jointly with allies. At the same time, he did not consider it possible to implement the policy of regime change through military intervention or the actions of the special services. However, he considered it possible to “provide non-military support to opposition movements striving for universal human rights and more representative and accountable government.”<sup>356</sup>

As for the Syrian issue, Joe Biden acted in two guises at once – as one of the direct participants in the implementation of Barack Obama's policy, and as a critic of Donald Trump's policy. In his first role, the then Vice President of the United States acted somewhat inconsistently. Biden fully supported Obama's Syrian course, calling Syrian President Assad a “tyrant who must go”<sup>357</sup>, and also one of the first to blame him for the August 2013 chemical attack in Ghouta.<sup>358</sup> Although he soon began to campaign for a diplomatic solution to the conflict.<sup>359</sup> Then, after the start of the ISIS\*<sup>360</sup> saga, Biden personally lobbied Congress for the adoption of a bill on the supply of weapons to the Syrian rebels.<sup>361</sup> But then he said that Türkiye, Saudi Arabia and the UAE “poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens thousands of tons of weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad. Except that the people who were being supplied were Al-Nusra\*, and Al-Qaeda\* and the extremist elements of jihadis coming from other parts of the world.”<sup>362</sup> Biden's statement is especially interesting in the context of his two-year-earlier claims that the US in Syria is “working hand in glove with the Turks, with the Jordanians, with the Saudis and with all the people in the region attempting to identify the people who deserve the help.”<sup>363</sup> Thus, in fact, the Vice President has exposed the United States as complicit in the actions of his Middle Eastern allies.

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<sup>356</sup> Joseph R. Biden Jr. – Foreign Policy Survey // The New York Times. URL:

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/politics/joe-biden-foreign-policy.html> (accessed: 10.02.2023)

<sup>357</sup> Biden says ‘Assad is a tyrant and must go’, calls on Russia for cooperation // Al Arabiya English. March 8, 2013. URL: <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/2013/03/08/Biden-says-Assad-is-a-tyrant-and-must-go-calls-on-Russia-for-cooperation-> (accessed: 10.02.2023)

<sup>358</sup> Biden says 'no doubt' Syrian government used chemical weapons // Reuters. August 28, 2013. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-syria-crisis-biden-idUKBRE97Q13R20130827> (accessed: 10.02.2023)

<sup>359</sup> In Iowa, Biden touts diplomatic progress in Syria // AP News. September 16, 2013. URL: <https://apnews.com/article/433e46e733784c2b95d2edfd4566c4b2> (accessed: 10.02.2023)

<sup>360</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>361</sup> *Weisman J.* House Votes to Authorize Aid to Syrian Rebels in ISIS\* Fight // The New York Times. September 17, 2014. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/18/us/politics/house-vote-isis.html> \* (accessed: 10.02.2023)

<sup>362</sup> Text of US ex-VP Biden's 2014 Revelation that Saudis, Emiratis and Turks Armed ISIS\* // Friends of WikiLeaks – Chicago. July 20, 2017. URL: <https://fowlchicago.wordpress.com/2017/07/20/text-of-us-ex-vp-bidens-2014-revelation-that-saudis-emiratis-and-turks-armed-isis/> (accessed: 10.02.2023)

<sup>363</sup> Transcript And Audio: Vice Presidential Debate // National Public Radio. October 11, 2012. URL: <https://www.npr.org/2012/10/11/162754053/transcript-biden-ryan-vice-presidential-debate> (accessed: 10.02.2023)

In his second role as a critic of Trump's policies, Biden spoke from a much more coherent position. E.g., Biden called the one of the American troops withdrawal from northeast Syria “the most shameful thing that any president has done in modern history in terms of foreign policy,”<sup>364</sup> and also warned that as a result of this decision, the Islamic State\*<sup>365</sup> will strike at America.<sup>366</sup>

The former vice president had his own opinion about the situation in Syria. Back in 2018, he called the Syrian conflict “a classic example of the biggest conundrum that we have to deal with”, where the European allies do not understand what the US is doing and whether it have any plan. In addition, Biden argued that Syria does not have any “unifying principle,” and the only thing that can be done here is to create “safe harbor in certain parts for the country” in order to “drastically reduce the number of people being displaced and killed.”<sup>367</sup>

However, closer to the election, Biden's plans for Syria became a bit more ambitious. Released in August 2020, the Arab-American Plan for Partnership clearly outlined the approximate approaches of the potential Syrian policy of the new Democratic administration. If elected, Biden was going to “recommit to standing with civil society and pro-democracy partners on the ground”; re-lead the Anti-ISIS\* Coalition; use all available levers in the region to achieve a political solution to the conflict; mobilize all countries to support the reconstruction of Syria; and to lead efforts to address humanitarian issues.<sup>368</sup> In addition, a little later, in September, Biden promised to maintain a small US military presence in Syria in order to “assist special operations against ISIS\*,” but allegedly not to “meddle in the political dynamics” of the country.<sup>369</sup> It is curious that the sacred demand for Assad's departure was never mentioned among the goals of the new administration – it was replaced by a more amorphous desire “to give more Syrians a voice.”<sup>370</sup>

What should also be noted is Joe Biden's special, yet again controversial, relationship with the Kurds. He supported the Iraqi Kurds starting in 1991, and this support subsequently extended to the Syrian Kurds.<sup>371</sup> At the same time, Biden recognized the danger posed to Türkiye by the Kurdistan Workers'

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<sup>364</sup> Blood on his hands: 2020 Democrats slam Trump over Syria // Reuters. October 16, 2019. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-debate-syria-idUSKBN1WV0N2> (accessed: 10.02.2023)

<sup>365</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>366</sup> *McCarthy T.* Biden warns Isis\* fighters will strike US over Syria withdrawal // The Guardian. October 16, 2019. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/oct/15/biden-isis-syria-attack-trump-withdrawal-warning> (accessed: 10.02.2023)

<sup>367</sup> Foreign Affairs Issue Launch with Former Vice President Joe Biden // Council on Foreign Relations. January 23, 2018. URL: <https://www.cfr.org/event/foreign-affairs-issue-launch-former-vice-president-joe-biden> (accessed: 10.02.2023)

<sup>368</sup> Joe Biden and the Arab American Community: A Plan for Partnership // Joe Biden for President. URL: <https://joebiden.com/joe-biden-and-the-arab-american-community-a-plan-for-partnership/> (accessed: 10.02.2023)

<sup>369</sup> *Beynon S.* Biden says US must maintain small force in Middle East, has no plans for major Defense cuts // Stars and Stripes. September 10, 2020. URL: <https://www.stripes.com/theaters/us/biden-says-us-must-maintain-small-force-in-middle-east-has-no-plans-for-major-defense-cuts-1.644631> (accessed: 10.02.2023)

<sup>370</sup> Joe Biden and the Arab American Community...

<sup>371</sup> *Saeed Y.* What Biden can and cannot do for the Kurds // Al Jazeera. December 3, 2020. URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/12/3/what-biden-can-and-cannot-do-for-the-kurds> (accessed: 10.02.2023)

Party<sup>372, 373</sup>, and also put serious pressure on the Syrian Kurds during the Turkish operation Euphrates Shield so that they complied with Ankara's conditions: retreated east of the Euphrates and did not try to create a separate proto-state entity in the controlled territories.<sup>374</sup> In any case, the Kurds of Syria themselves had high hopes for the elected president<sup>375</sup>.

Thus, we can conclude that practically Joe Biden's views on the Syrian policy did not differ much from the policy actually pursued in 2011-2016 by the Obama administration. At the same time, many expected him to correct the mistakes made in those years.<sup>376</sup> Probably, this wish was based on the fact that Biden had much more foreign policy experience than Obama, which would've allowed him to "clean up the mess" his predecessors made. However, in our opinion, it was the experience that kept the 46th POTUS from taking rash and risky steps, into which this attempt would've inevitably resulted. Instead, he chose to focus on mundane but innocuous activities – delivering humanitarian aid, fighting ISIS\* remnants, and fighting for a political settlement of the conflict – which, moreover, contributed to the "freezing" of the conflict, preventing Iran and Russia from finally resolving it in favor of Damascus.

### **Government-Society Relations in the United States**

With the development of telecommunications, the foreign policy decision-making process in recent decades is less and less carried out in an atmosphere of complete secrecy and closeness from the public. Public opinion is becoming an important factor to which decision makers must be guided in all countries, from democracies to autocracies and even totalitarian regimes. This maybe applies best to the United States where "foreign policy has become domestic policy from a public opinion perspective"<sup>377</sup> and where "politicians more often than others have to convince citizens of the need for this or that decision."<sup>378</sup> Therefore, for the topic under consideration, this factor is of no small importance.

In 2011, the American public was not very interested in the events in Syria. This is not surprising – much more attention was then attracted by the political leapfrog in Egypt and the bloody civil war in

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<sup>372</sup> PKK and IS\* 'pose existential threats' to Turkey: Biden // Middle East Eye. January 23, 2016. URL: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/pkk-and-pose-existential-threats-turkey-biden> (accessed: 19.07.2023) (with \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked)

<sup>373</sup> The "subsidiary" organization of the PKK is the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), whose militant organization, the YPG, has become the main US ally in northeast Syria since the fall of 2014.

<sup>374</sup> *DeYoung K.* Biden warns Kurds not to seek separate enclave on Turkish-Syrian border // The Washington Post. August 24, 2016. URL: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/biden-visits-turkey-on-mission-to-repair-strained-relations/2016/08/24/bc684904-6a04-11e6-99bf-f0cf3a6449a6\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/biden-visits-turkey-on-mission-to-repair-strained-relations/2016/08/24/bc684904-6a04-11e6-99bf-f0cf3a6449a6_story.html) (accessed: 10.02.2023)

<sup>375</sup> *Faidhi Dri K.* What can Syrian Kurds expect from Biden? // Rudaw. November 12, 2020. URL: <https://www.rudaw.net/english/analysis/12112020> (accessed: 10.02.2023)

<sup>376</sup> *Rogin J.* Biden must fix Obama's biggest foreign policy failure // The Washington Post. September 3, 2020. URL: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/biden-must-fix-obamas-biggest-foreign-policy-failure/2020/09/03/ed308ee0-ee1a-11ea-99a1-71343d03bc29\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/biden-must-fix-obamas-biggest-foreign-policy-failure/2020/09/03/ed308ee0-ee1a-11ea-99a1-71343d03bc29_story.html) (accessed: 10.02.2023)

<sup>377</sup> *Foyle D.* Public Opinion and Foreign Policy // Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics. August 22, 2017. URL: <https://oxfordre.com/politics/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-472.jsessionid=CE7E57B689FF918694E033B0D6AF8056> (accessed: 20.02.2023)

<sup>378</sup> *Bordachev T.* International Relations Theory in the 21st century. Moscow: International relations, 2015. P. 8.

Libya (as we will see below, the foreign policy priorities of the White House were exactly the same at that time).<sup>379</sup> However, the Libyan example in the context of our study is a fairly relevant indicator.

According to the polls of the two largest American public opinion research centers, Gallup and Pew, the number of supporters of tough measures against Gaddafi was not so large. According to Gallup, only 47% of Americans were in favor of US military action in Libya, which was the lowest level of support since the intervention in Grenada in 1983.<sup>380</sup> Pew paints an even more non-interventionist picture: according to the center, only 16% of Americans were for the bombing of Libyan military installations. The society was divided even on such an issue as the imposition of new sanctions against Libya – only 51% supported such a decision, while 40% opposed it. In addition, just over a quarter of the respondents believed that the United States is responsible for Libya and thus must somehow respond to what is happening there.<sup>381</sup>

The assessment of the Libyan events after the fact was also clearly not in favor of the White House. During the year, the proportion of Americans who believed that the United States did the right thing gradually decreased (from 50 to 44%). In addition, it is interesting to note the fact that support for the actions of the United States and Obama personally was 15-20% higher among those who “closely followed the news from Libya”<sup>382</sup> – the American government and the media supporting it still managed to ‘sell’ to more involved to the inhabitants of the “correct” picture of the Libyan intervention.

Despite this, the Americans' views on the Syrian events, to which their attention shifted in 2012, again showed their reluctance to intervene. Despite the fact that support of active military operations in Syria – the bombing of government troops and the supply of weapons to the rebels – was 5-10% higher than in favor of similar actions in Libya last year, the vast majority opposed such measures.<sup>383</sup> The situation did not change by the end of the year – fluctuations of a few percent did not change the overall picture of the Americans' mood against the supply of weapons to the rebels (65%) and treating Syrian events as a zone of US responsibility (63%).<sup>384</sup>

The next year at first also did not bring any changes in the position of American citizens on Syria. Interest in the Syrian events was falling. Many believed that it was important for the United States to

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<sup>379</sup> Libya Dominates the News as U.S. Enters the War // Pew Research Center. March 26, 2011. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2011/03/26/pej-news-coverage-index-march-2127-2011/> (accessed: 20.02.2023)

<sup>380</sup> Americans Approve of Military Action Against Libya, 47% to 37% // Gallup. March 22, 2011. URL: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/146738/americans-approve-military-action-against-libya.aspx> (accessed: 20.02.2023)

<sup>381</sup> Public Wary of Military Intervention in Libya // Pew Research Center. March 14, 2011. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2011/03/14/public-wary-of-military-intervention-in-libya/> (accessed: 20.02.2023)

<sup>382</sup> Libya: Steady Views, Declining Interest // Pew Research Center. September 8, 2011. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2011/09/08/libya-steady-views-declining-interest/> (accessed: 20.02.2023)

<sup>383</sup> Little Support for U.S. Intervention in Syrian Conflict // Pew Research Center. March 15, 2012. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2012/03/15/little-support-for-u-s-intervention-in-syrian-conflict/> (accessed: 20.02.2023)

<sup>384</sup> Public Says U.S. Does Not Have Responsibility to Act in Syria // Pew Research Center. December 14, 2012. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2012/12/14/public-says-u-s-does-not-have-responsibility-to-act-in-syria/> (accessed: 20.02.2023)

support people who oppose authoritarian regimes (53%), but the number of supporters of arming the Syrian opposition was relatively low – from 20%.<sup>385</sup> to 37%.<sup>386</sup> The public was also opposed to US military intervention in the Syrian conflict (24% vs. 68%), while being extremely skeptical about the prospects for a diplomatic settlement of the conflict and the success of sanctions pressure – only 27% believed that this would bring success.<sup>387</sup> The American audience was tired of the endless Middle Eastern wars, and their outcome no longer bothered them much.

In the meantime, the “chemical August” of 2013 was coming. Back in April, the Pew Center conducted a survey about the possibility of supporting the use of force against Syria if chemical weapons were used there. The results showed a slight preponderance in favor of supporters of such measures (45% vs. 31%), while again there were 10% more supporters of the bombing among the “followers of the news in Syria.”<sup>388</sup>

However, when the chemical attack did occur, even this low level of support almost evaporated. In early September, only 29%.<sup>389</sup> to 36%.<sup>390</sup> of Americans were in favor of US military intervention. The public feared that the US military action would cause a backlash in the region (74%) and drag the country into another long war (61%). Only a third believed that strikes would be an effective means of preventing the use of chemical weapons. More than half (59%) also believed that the US needed to gain international support in the form of a UN resolution.<sup>391</sup> The Americans did not believe in their leadership either – in their opinion, President Obama did not clearly explain the goals of a possible operation.<sup>392</sup>

Ultimately, the number of opponents of the military response began to show continuous growth and reached the mark of 63%.<sup>393</sup> It is very likely that this became one of the catalysts for Obama's decision to drop military options and agree to Russia's plan to eliminate Syria's chemical weapons.<sup>394</sup> However, this presidential decision was met with distrust by the Americans: despite the fact that two-thirds of those

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<sup>385</sup> Public Remains Opposed to Arming Syrian Rebels // Pew Research Center. June 17, 2013. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2013/06/17/public-remains-opposed-to-arming-syrian-rebels/> (accessed: 20.02.2023)

<sup>386</sup> Americans Disapprove of U.S. Decision to Arm Syrian Rebels // Gallup. June 17, 2013. URL: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/163112/americans-disapprove-decision-arm-syrian-rebels.aspx> (accessed: 20.02.2023)

<sup>387</sup> Americans Oppose U.S. Military Involvement in Syria // Gallup. May 31, 2013. URL: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/162854/americans-oppose-military-involvement-syria.aspx> (accessed: 20.02.2023)

<sup>388</sup> Modest Support for Military Force if Syria Used Chemical Weapons // Pew Research Center. April 29, 2013. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2013/04/29/modest-support-for-military-force-if-syria-used-chemical-weapons/> (accessed: 20.02.2023)

<sup>389</sup> Public Opinion Runs Against Syrian Airstrikes // Pew Research Center. September 3, 2013. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2013/09/03/public-opinion-runs-against-syrian-airstrikes/> (accessed: 20.02.2023)

<sup>390</sup> U.S. Support for Action in Syria Is Low vs. Past Conflicts // Gallup. September 6, 2013. URL: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/164282/support-syria-action-lower-past-conflicts.aspx> (accessed: 20.02.2023)

<sup>391</sup> Public Opinion Runs Against...

<sup>392</sup> Obama makes his case for Syrian airstrikes: Is it working? // Pew Research Center. September 4, 2013. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/09/04/obama-makes-his-case-for-syrian-airstrikes-is-it-working/> (accessed: 20.02.2023)

<sup>393</sup> Opposition to Syrian Airstrikes Surges // Pew Research Center. September 9, 2013. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2013/09/09/opposition-to-syrian-airstrikes-surges/> (accessed: 20.02.2023)

<sup>394</sup> Public Opinion and Military Action in Syria // Gallup. September 11, 2013. URL: <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/169556/public-opinion-military-action-syria.aspx> (accessed: 20.02.2023)

polled were positive about the idea of postponing strikes on Syria and giving diplomacy a chance, only 26% believed that Damascus would keep its word. Accordingly, 37% were still willing to approve military measures, provided that Assad violated the terms of the deal<sup>395</sup> – compliance with the agreements meant more to ordinary citizens than some abstract moral imperatives<sup>396</sup>.

However, the fight against terrorism meant even more to Americans after the events of 9/11. Accordingly, the approval level of the military campaign against the Islamic State\*<sup>397</sup> that began in the summer-autumn of 2014 was at a relatively high level – from 53%<sup>398</sup> to 60%<sup>399</sup> of respondents expressed support for Obama's decision. At the same time, the course of hostilities was considered by the public quite critically. About 60% of those polled felt that the operation was not going too smoothly and the US lacked a clear goal, more than 70% were dissatisfied with the level of support for the US from the allies, and more than half opposed the idea of sending ground troops to Iraq and Syria. In addition, the inter-party split was clearly manifested: the Democrats believed that the United States was doing too much, while the Republicans, on the contrary, thought it was not doing enough<sup>400</sup>. This, in turn, was one of the reasons for the success of the GOP in the midterm elections held in November 2014 – the Republicans were considered the party more adapted to the fight against terrorism<sup>401</sup>.

In 2015-2016 support for the anti-ISIS\* campaign remained at the same level of 60-63%. Also, the Syrian conflict itself was perceived equally negatively in the United States (58% viewed it as a critical threat to the United States, and another 32% as a serious one<sup>402</sup>), as well as Syria itself – 80% of American citizens had a negative impression of the country, and among Republicans this indicator reached 90%<sup>403</sup>. However, on a number of issues related to the Syrian conflict, a serious split was brewing in American society, and almost everywhere it had a clear inter-party character.

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<sup>395</sup> Public Backs Diplomatic Approach in Syria, But Distrusts Syria and Russia // Pew Research Center. September 16, 2013. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2013/09/16/public-backs-diplomatic-approach-in-syria-but-distrusts-syria-and-russia/> (accessed: 20.02.2023)

<sup>396</sup> In foreign affairs, Americans are less receptive to moral arguments // Pew Research Center. September 6, 2013. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/09/06/in-foreign-affairs-americans-are-less-receptive-to-moral-arguments/> (accessed: 20.02.2023)

<sup>397</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>398</sup> Bipartisan Support for Obama's Military Campaign Against ISIS\* // Pew Research Center. September 15, 2014. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2014/09/15/bipartisan-support-for-obamas-military-campaign-against-isis/> (accessed: 20.02.2023)

<sup>399</sup> Slightly Fewer Back ISIS\* Military Action vs. Past Actions // Gallup. September 23, 2014. URL: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/177263/slightly-fewer-back-isis-military-action-past-actions.aspx> (accessed: 20.02.2023)

<sup>400</sup> Support for U.S. Campaign against ISIS\*; Doubts about Its Effectiveness, Objectives // Pew Research Center. October 22, 2014. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2014/10/22/support-for-u-s-campaign-against-isis-doubts-about-its-effectiveness-objectives/> (accessed: 20.02.2023)

<sup>401</sup> U.S. Voters Give GOP Edge vs. Dems on Handling Top Issues // Gallup. October 13, 2014. URL: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/178268/voters-give-gop-edge-handling-top-issues.aspx> (accessed: 20.02.2023)

<sup>402</sup> Americans Cite Cyberterrorism Among Top Three Threats to U.S. // Gallup. February 10, 2016. URL: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/189161/americans-cite-cyberterrorism-among-top-three-threats.aspx> (accessed: 20.02.2023)

<sup>403</sup> Four in Five Americans View Syria Unfavorably // Gallup. February 19, 2016. URL: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/189338/four-five-americans-view-syria-unfavorably.aspx> (accessed: 20.02.2023)

Firstly, the public split over the issue of sending ground troops to Iraq and Syria, with almost two-thirds of Republicans in favor of the idea, while about the same number of Democrats and independents were opposed<sup>404</sup>.

Secondly, as noted above, the parties disagreed about the degree of US involvement in the fight against ISIS\*: the Republicans believed that Washington was doing too little, the Democrats thought that the government was too involved in the conflict<sup>405</sup>.

Thirdly, most Republicans thought the anti-ISIS\* campaign was failing, while Democrats split roughly in half. It is interesting to note that there was also an internal split in the Democratic camp – Hillary Clinton's supporters were more inclined to support the current state of affairs, while Bernie Sanders' supporters united with the Republicans on this issue<sup>406</sup>.

Finally, one could note a certain split regarding the plans of the White House to accept 10,000 Syrian refugees. While the Democrats supported the project by a relative majority (57%), the Republicans for the most part were categorically opposed to this idea (84%)<sup>407</sup>.

All of this together serves as a great example of what the 2016 US presidential election subsequently proved: America was dangerously split in half. The attitude of Americans to the Syrian conflict has become yet another particular manifestation of this split.

Speaking about the interaction between government and society, one cannot help but touch upon the topic of confrontation between the president and the US Congress (more broadly, the entire “Washington swamp”, i.e. bureaucracy), which most clearly manifested itself during the presidency of Donald Trump. The White House and the Capitol could not see eye to eye on almost all domestic and foreign policy issues, including Syrian one. While Trump wanted to focus on fighting the Islamic State\*, put aside plans for regime change in Syria, and somehow engage with Russia, Congress, on the contrary, advocated strong pressure on Moscow and Damascus.

It seemed that at least with regard to Tehran, the approaches of the executive and legislative branches of power coincided, but the situation that developed after the US withdrew from the JCPOA clearly demonstrated the opposite – the White House stated that the president's decision was correct and demonstrates pressure on Iran, while Congress accused Trump of loss of leverage in relations with the

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<sup>404</sup> Americans Evenly Split on Sending Troops to Fight Islamic State\* // Gallup. November 24, 2015. URL: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/186887/americans-evenly-split-sending-troops-fight-islamic-state-group.aspx> (accessed: 20.02.2023) (with \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked)

<sup>405</sup> U.S. military action against ISIS\*, policy toward terrorism / Public Uncertain, Divided Over America’s Place in the World // Pew Research Center. May 5, 2016. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2016/05/05/4-u-s-military-action-against-isis-policy-toward-terrorism/> (accessed: 20.02.2023)

<sup>406</sup> Ibid.

<sup>407</sup> Americans Again Opposed to Taking In Refugees // Gallup. November 23, 2015. URL: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/186866/americans-again-opposed-taking-refugees.aspx> (accessed: 20.02.2023)



Islamic Republic<sup>408</sup>. It seemed that the Capitol, regardless of the situation, was simply trying to take a position opposite to that of the White House.

Also worth mentioning is the problem of the indirect influence of the domestic political situation on the implementation of the US policy in Syria. It is precisely because of the hysteria associated with possible Russian interference in the 2016 elections that President Trump was forced to react as harshly as possible to the alleged chemical attacks in April 2017 and April 2018 in order to somehow refute these statements. It is curious to note that both times the president was inclined to take even tougher measures than were actually implemented, but each time the head of the White House was held back by his subordinates, for example, Secretary of Defense James Mattis<sup>409</sup>.

However, even the strikes on Syria could not seriously improve Trump's rating. Both actions were supported by exactly 50% of Americans, while the number of opponents of strikes was 41% in the first case<sup>410</sup> and 43% in the second<sup>411</sup>. The Democrats, as expected, did not support the measures taken by the Republican president because of, among other things, they did not see much sense in what was happening – in their view (which was, however, not so far from the truth), the strikes were chaotic and were not part of a long-term strategy<sup>412</sup>.

In general, it can be said that during the Trump presidency, Syria has turned for the American audience, as well as for the American leadership, from an independent problem into a battlefield or “grey-zone” – a place where the United States was fighting against its rivals. Nevertheless, this battlefield still seemed to the Americans quite important. E.g., at the beginning of 2017, out of the eight most important, according to the Pew Center, threats to the United States, three were directly related to the conflict in Syria – the Islamic State\*<sup>413</sup> (the leader of the list, 79%), the power and influence of Russia (54%) and the flow of refugees from Iraq and Syria (46%)<sup>414</sup>. Two years later, two of the top 10 countries named by the Americans as the main enemies of the United States were directly involved in the Syrian conflict (Russia with 32% and Iran with 9%). At the same time, Syria itself, with 1%, is in last, tenth place in the ranking<sup>415</sup>.

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<sup>408</sup> “A historical mistake”... (In Russ.). URL: <https://russian.rt.com/world/article/510993-kongress-ssha-kritika-trump-sdelka-iran> (accessed: 02.03.2020)

<sup>409</sup> Bolton J. *The Room Where It Happened*. Simon & Shuster, 2020. P. 51-52.

<sup>410</sup> U.S. Support for Syria Strikes Rates Low in Historical Context // Gallup. April 10, 2017. URL: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/208334/support-syria-strikes-rates-low-historical-context.aspx> (accessed: 21.02.2023)

<sup>411</sup> Snapshot: Half of Americans Approve of Strikes on Syria // Gallup. April 24, 2018. URL: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/232997/snapshot-half-americans-approve-strikes-syria.aspx> (accessed: 21.02.2023)

<sup>412</sup> Public Supports Syria Missile Strikes, but Few See a ‘Clear Plan’ for Addressing Situation // Pew Research Center. April 12, 2017. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2017/04/12/public-supports-syria-missile-strikes-but-few-see-a-clear-plan-for-addressing-situation/> (accessed: 21.02.2023)

<sup>413</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>414</sup> The World Facing Trump: Public Sees ISIS\*, Cyberattacks, North Korea as Top Threats // Pew Research Center. January 12, 2017. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2017/01/12/the-world-facing-trump-public-sees-isis-cyberattacks-north-korea-as-top-threats/> (accessed: 21.02.2023)

<sup>415</sup> Majority of Americans Now Consider Russia a Critical Threat // Gallup. February 27, 2019. URL: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/247100/majority-americans-consider-russia-critical-threat.aspx> (accessed: 21.02.2023)

Meanwhile, the campaign against ISIS\*<sup>416</sup> was developing successfully: the two “capitals” of the self-proclaimed caliphate, Iraqi Mosul and Syrian Raqqa, were liberated from the Islamists by the forces of the pro-American coalition in July and October 2017, respectively. The result was clear, and approval ratings for the anti-ISIS\* campaign raised sharply from 31% in October 2016 to 55% in October 2017. Even more approval for the success of the US and its allies in the Middle East came from the Republicans, where the changes were even more dramatic – rating increased by as much as 47 points, from 20 to 67%.<sup>417</sup>

At the same time, the gap between Republicans and Democrats was more pronounced on another topic – the withdrawal of US troops from northeast Syria. The foreign policy views of the Republican Party have changed somewhat over the years of the Trump presidency, so it is not surprising that a relative majority of party supporters (58%) supported the president's decision, and also agreed with the statement that he is following a certain plan (56%). Democrats, as expected, were not so supportive of Trump's decision. And if only a little more than half of the respondents (60%) opposed the very decision to withdraw troops, then the overwhelming majority of supporters of the Democratic Party (91%) denied Trump the presence of any strategy for Syria. In addition, once again it is interesting to note an even worsening gap in the perception of the president's decision to withdraw troops among the “closely following the topic” – 66% of supporters among Republicans and 79% of opponents among Democrats.<sup>418</sup> This gap is likely telling us a lot about the great role of the media, successfully broadcasting a certain party agenda to their audience.

As for the impact of the interaction between the government and society on the US policy in Syria during the presidency of Joe Biden, we can hardly draw any conclusions here due to the lack of sufficient data. Thanks to indirect data, one can only make an assumption that Syria, in the eyes of the average American, has finally turned from an independent problem into a place of confrontation between the United States and other major regional and extra-regional players, such as Iran and Russia, as well as with the remnants of the Islamic State\*. Nevertheless, in this context, the Syrian conflict indirectly continued to be a relatively significant topic. Thus, the three main US adversaries in Syria – Iran, Russia and international terrorism – continued to be on the list of the main threats to US interests as of February 2021.<sup>419</sup> and February 2022.<sup>420</sup>

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<sup>416</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>417</sup> Partisans Have Starkly Different Opinions About How the World Views the U.S. // Gallup. November 9, 2017. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2017/11/09/partisans-have-starkly-different-opinions-about-how-the-world-views-the-u-s/> (accessed: 21.02.2023)

<sup>418</sup> Americans divided over decision to withdraw from Syria // Pew Research Center. January 19, 2019. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/18/americans-divided-over-decision-to-withdraw-from-syria/> (accessed: 22.02.2023)

<sup>419</sup> Cyberterrorism Tops List of 11 Potential Threats to U.S. // Gallup. March 22, 2021. URL: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/339974/cyberterrorism-tops-list-potential-threats.aspx> (accessed: 22.02.2023)

<sup>420</sup> Terrorism, Nuclear Weapons, China Viewed as Top U.S. Threats // Gallup. March 7, 2022. URL: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/390494/terrorism-nuclear-weapons-china-viewed-top-threats.aspx> (accessed: 22.02.2023)

## U.S. Strategic Culture

The concept of the strategic culture of the state, including the strategic culture of the United States of America has been attracting the attention of both foreign<sup>421</sup> and Russian<sup>422</sup> scientists for more than a dozen years. Accordingly, many definitions of this term have been developed. We are much agree the point of view of the Russian scholar A.A. Kokoshin, who defines strategic culture as “a set of stereotypes of sustainable behavior of the relevant subject with large-scale use of military force in terms of its political tasks and military goals, including in the preparation, adoption and implementation of strategic decisions.” In his opinion, strategic culture is “a long-term, very inertial socio-psychological phenomenon that often operates with almost the same characteristics even when not only top statesmen and military command change, but when political systems and political regimes change.”<sup>423</sup> In other words, strategic culture refers to the style and methods developed over the years for a certain state to respond to various foreign policy challenges.

After analyzing the scientific literature, the following characteristics of the US strategic culture can be identified:

- At the level of National Strategic Culture:
  - Belief in American exceptionalism and the unique mission of the USA, as well as in the universality and attractiveness of American values and model of society;
  - Active creation of the enemy image and its subsequent demonization;
- At the level of Military Strategic Culture<sup>424</sup>:
  - Low tolerance for casualties among personnel;
  - Focus on massive firepower, speed of action and the use of advanced technologies;
  - The great importance of allies “on the ground”, capable of doing all the “dirty work”.

With regard to the perception, decision and implementation of policy regarding the Syrian conflict, the strategic culture of the United States manifested itself distinctly and vividly. From the very beginning

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<sup>421</sup> See, e.g.: *Snyder J.L.* The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations // RAND corporation. 1977. URL: <https://www.rand.org/pubs/reports/R2154.html> (accessed: 24.02.2023); *Gray C.S.* National Style in Strategy: The American Example // *International Security*. 1981, Vol. 6, No. 2. P. 21-47; *Johnston A.I.* Thinking about Strategic Culture // *International Security*. 1995, Vol. 19, No. 4. P. 32-64; *Farell T.* Strategic Culture and American Empire // *The SAIS Review of International Affairs*. 2005, Vol. 25, No. 2. P. 3-18; *Echevarria II A.J.* American Strategic Culture: Problems and Prospects / *Strachan H., Scheipers S. (eds.)*. The Changing Character of War. Oxford University Press, 2011. 564 p.

<sup>422</sup> See, e.g.: *Zhinkina I.* US Strategic Thinking (In Russ.) // *USA & Canada: Economics, Politics, Culture*. 2002, №3. P. 78-93; *Kokoshin A.* Strategic management. Theory, historical experience, comparative analysis, tasks for Russia. (In Russ.). Moscow: ROSSPAN, 2003. 528 p.; *Davydov Yu.* Strategic cultures of the USA and Europe (In Russ.) // *USA & Canada: Economics, Politics, Culture*. 2006, №3. P. 48-70; *Alexeeva T.* Strategic culture: the evolution of the concept (In Russ.) // *Polis*. 2012, № 5. P. 130-147; *Bartosh A.* Strategic culture as a tool for military-political analysis (In Russ.) // *Military Thought*. July 13, 2020. URL: <https://vm.ric.mil.ru/Stati/item/259344/> (accessed: 24.02.2023)

<sup>423</sup> *Ivanov O.* The US use of military force: a rational and irrational approach. (In Russ.). Moscow: Scientific thought, 2007. P. 88-89.

<sup>424</sup> The division into National, Military and Service Strategic Culture was taken from: *Mahnken T.G.* United States Strategic Culture // Defense Threat Reduction Agency, Advanced Systems and Concepts Office. November 13, 2006. URL: <https://irp.fas.org/agency/dod/dtra/us.pdf> (accessed: 24.02.2023)

of the unrest in Syria the American leadership was convinced that the protesters represent the vast majority of the Syrian people and that after the overthrow of the Assad regime they would be able to build a Western-style state in Syria. Under these conditions, the American elite saw it as their moral duty to help the rebels (although, as we noted earlier, the US population did not share the views of the elites too much in this respect).<sup>425</sup> For these purposes, the image of the “bloody dictator Assad” was successfully built, the one who does not want to compromise, but instead only seeks to kill his own people.<sup>426</sup> Subsequently, similar images of Iran<sup>427</sup> and Russia<sup>428</sup> were added to this narrative as the same dictatorial regimes helping Assad in his dirty work.

At the same time, the United States was in no hurry to intervene on the behalf of the rebels due to the potentially high level of losses, the nature of which we previously considered in §1.3.1. Therefore, the United States preferred to operate at a distance, providing the rebels with diplomatic cover and supplying weapons and non-lethal assistance with the help of its allies in the region – Türkiye, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and also seeking the so-called “nationalization of the conflict.”<sup>429</sup> However, when it did come to the use of military force – for example, against the Islamic State\*<sup>430</sup> under Obama, after chemical attacks under Trump, or after drone strikes on American bases under Biden – it was used exactly in accordance with the norms of strategic culture – in the form swift massive strikes using high-precision weapons.

### **Bureaucracy and foreign policy decision-making and implementation process**

No less than the foreign policy positions of American presidents, we are interested in the positions of those directly responsible for the implementation of the US foreign policy. These persons are the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense. In addition, US ambassadors to the UN, heads of the CIA and National Security Advisors may be of some interest, depending on the context.

*Barack Obama first-term administration.* The first Secretary of State under Obama was his main rival in the Democratic primaries, former US First Lady Hillary Clinton. During her Senate hearings, Clinton was a vocal advocate for the concept of so-called “smart power”. In her opinion, the US should use “the

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<sup>425</sup> U.S. says opposition must build “free, tolerant” Syria // Reuters. December 6, 2011. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-idUSTRE7B51KB20111206> (accessed: 24.02.2023)

<sup>426</sup> See: *Dolgov B.* Syrian crisis (2011-2021): conflict development (In Russ.) // *Islamic studies*. 2021, № 3. P. 8. DOI: 10.21779/2077-8155-2021-12-3-5-21; *Diesen G.* Russophobia. Palgrave Macmillan Singapore, 2022. P. 229-249. DOI: 10.1007/978-981-19-1468-3

<sup>427</sup> *Filatov S.* Tehran – 12 (In Russ.) // *International Affairs*. December 27, 2011. URL: <https://interaffairs.ru/news/show/8164> (accessed: 24.02.2023)

<sup>428</sup> Deputy: The West uses the topics of Ukraine and Syria to demonize Russia (In Russ.) // *RIA Novosti*. October 20, 2016. URL: <https://ria.ru/20161020/1479617077.html> (accessed: 24.02.2023)

<sup>429</sup> *Baryshev A.* Modern strategy of the USA and NATO (in the context of Russian national security problems). Moscow: OGI, 2011. P. 18.

<sup>430</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

full range of tools at its disposal – diplomatic, economic, military, political, legal and cultural – choosing the right tool, or a combination of them, for each situation.”<sup>431</sup>

It is important to note, however, that seven years ago Clinton voted in favor of the Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution of 2002, which opened the way for President George W. Bush to invade Iraq. Moreover, she claimed that Iraq was supporting Al-Qaeda\*<sup>432</sup>, thereby showing herself to be one of the most ardent Democrats–supporters of the invasion. Clinton even refused to support the so-called Levin Amendment to the resolution, which required the UN approval the US action and, if failed, that the president reapply to Congress for AUMF, thus leaving war against Iraq as the last possible solution. However, in 2007, with the situation already changed, Clinton “spoke with equal fervor about the need to end the war.”<sup>433</sup>

Returning to the Senate hearings, it is worth saying that the Secretary of State nominee did not bypass the Syrian issue. E.g., already in her opening statement Clinton noted that she plans to use the same “smart power” approach as part of her Middle East policy, among other things to “persuade Iran and Syria to abandon their dangerous behavior and become constructive regional actors.”<sup>434</sup> But more importantly, Clinton bluntly named the US's “basic demands” on Syria: cooperation in stabilizing Iraq; ending support for terrorist groups; stopping the flow of weapons to Hezbollah; respect for the sovereignty and independence of Lebanon. Here, Clinton noted the importance of “direct engagement” of the United States with Syria as “increasing the likelihood of progress in changing Syrian behavior.”<sup>435</sup>

Finally, speaking about Hillary Clinton's foreign policy positions, one cannot fail to mention the key role that she, according to many experts, even liberal ones, played in establishing a no-fly zone over Libya in 2011, unleashing NATO military intervention and ultimately in making Libya what it is today<sup>436</sup>. Subsequently, then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who will be discussed below, will note that “it was Clinton's support that forced the wavering president to cross the line.”<sup>437</sup>

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<sup>431</sup> Nomination of Hillary R. Clinton to Be Secretary of State // United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. January 13, 2009. P. 17. URL: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-111shrg54615/pdf/CHRG-111shrg54615.pdf> (accessed: 17.01.2023)

<sup>432</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>433</sup> Gerth J., Natta Jr. D.V. Hillary's War // The New York Times. May 29, 2007. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/29/magazine/03Hillary-t.html> (accessed: 17.01.2023)

<sup>434</sup> Nomination of Hillary R. Clinton... P. 19.

<sup>435</sup> Ibid. P. 108.

<sup>436</sup> See: Friedersdorf C. Hillary Defends Her Failed War in Libya // The Atlantic. October 14, 2015. URL: <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/10/hillary-clinton-debate-libya/410437/> (accessed: 17.01.2023); Hillary Clinton's other Libya problem // CNN. October 21, 2015. URL: <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/06/08/politics/hillary-clinton-libya-election-2016/index.html> (accessed: 17.01.2023); Ghattas K. Hillary Clinton Has No Regrets About Libya // Foreign Policy. April 14, 2016. URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/04/14/hillary-clinton-has-no-regrets-about-libya/> (accessed: 17.01.2023); Kubic C.R. Hillary's Huge Libya Disaster // The National Interest. June 15, 2016. URL: <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/hillarys-huge-libya-disaster-16600> (accessed: 17.01.2023)

<sup>437</sup> Becker J., Shane S. Hillary Clinton, ‘Smart Power’ and a Dictator's Fall // The New York Times. February 27, 2016. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/us/politics/hillary-clinton-libya.html> (accessed: 17.01.2023)

Robert Gates himself, Hillary Clinton's colleague in Obama's first cabinet, can rightfully be called an outstanding person. He became the only low-level CIA analyst to rise to the position of Director of Central Intelligence (1991-1993), as well as the only Secretary of Defense to serve under two presidents from different parties – Barack Obama asked him to stay on his post, to which Gates was appointed by George W. Bush in 2006.

In an attempt to win the support of the Democratic Party on Afghanistan issues, Gates engaged very actively with Clinton, with whom they formed an “impressive partnership.”<sup>438</sup> However, according to Gates himself in his memoir, he, along with the majority of the NSS, opposed military intervention in Libya. However, it is worth noting that pragmatic considerations influenced his position to a greater extent. According to him, he “opposed the United States attacking the third Muslim country within a decade to bring about regime change, no matter how odious the regime” because the US military was “overstretched and tired”, and the crisis in Libya threatened to develop into a “protracted conflict.” In addition, Gates was most infuriated by “people blithely talking about the use of military force as though it were some kind of video game.”<sup>439</sup> At the same time, one cannot help but wonder how sincerely Gates paints his position on Libya three years later, when the negative effects of the Western invasion have already manifested themselves in all their glory.

In the Obama administration, according to American journalist Elizabeth Rubin, Gates was “a key broker on the question that haunts every US president: how and when to use military force.”<sup>440</sup> However, he did not manage to do much on the Syrian problem. He was replaced already in June 2011 by Leon Panetta, a “pragmatic centrist”<sup>441</sup>, who had previously held the post of director of the CIA since 2009. In his previous role, Panetta was noted mainly for his operation to assassinate Al-Qaeda\*<sup>442</sup> leader Osama bin Laden in May 2011, as well as by conducting an internal investigation into the torture of people detained by the CIA during the presidency of George W. Bush (which, however, would become known only several years later).<sup>443</sup> At the same time, the CIA under Panetta was criticized (by some reports even from Obama) for failing to provide the White House with an accurate forecast of the events of the Arab Spring<sup>444</sup>.

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<sup>438</sup> *Rubin E.* What Is Robert Gates Really Fighting For? // Time. February 3, 2010. URL: <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,1960261-1,00.html> (accessed: 17.01.2023)

<sup>439</sup> *Gates R.* Duty. Memoir of the Secretary... P. 511-512.

<sup>440</sup> *Rubin E.* What Is Robert Gates...

<sup>441</sup> *Ignatius D.* Book review: Leon Panetta's 'Worthy Fights' // The Washington Post. October 6, 2014. URL: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/book-review-leon-panettas-worthy-fights/2014/10/06/ed517c6e-4d70-11e4-aa5e-7153e466a02d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/book-review-leon-panettas-worthy-fights/2014/10/06/ed517c6e-4d70-11e4-aa5e-7153e466a02d_story.html) (accessed: 18.01.2023)

<sup>442</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>443</sup> *Mazetti M.* Behind Clash Between C.I.A. and Congress, a Secret Report on Interrogations // The New York Times. March 7, 2014. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/08/us/politics/behind-clash-between-cia-and-congress-a-secret-report-on-interrogations.html> (accessed: 18.01.2023)

<sup>444</sup> See: *Mazetti M.* Obama Faults Spy Agencies' Performance in Gauging Mideast Unrest, Officials Say // The New York Times. February 4, 2011. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/05/world/middleeast/05cia.html> (accessed: 18.01.2023); *Baer R.* Why Was the CIA Blind in Egypt? // Time. February 16, 2011. URL:

As Secretary of Defense, Panetta, apparently, was supposed to become the “antipode of Gates”, who actively participated in the planning and implementation of US foreign policy. His main task as head of the Pentagon was to resolve successfully the budgetary problems that arose in the DOD.<sup>445</sup> In this case, the choice of Panetta as the man who previously served first on the House Budget Committee in 1979-1993 (including as chairman of the committee in 1989-1993) and then as director of the Office of Management and Budget (1993-1994) was quite obvious. As for the Syrian affairs, the parsimony of how Panetta describes them in his memoirs clearly does not indicate his deep involvement in them.<sup>446</sup>

It is also worth mentioning Panetta's successor as head of the CIA, the glorious “King David” – General David Petraeus, who previously commanded the Multinational Force in Iraq, US Central Command (CENTCOM) and the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan. In a word, the general was extremely savvy in the Middle Eastern affairs. One cannot ignore his statements during the hearings in the Senate, during which he noted the “tremendous significance” of the CIA covert operations for the country, and also promised, if his candidacy was approved, “constantly look for new threats and opportunities”, among which he listed and “further developments during the Arab Spring.”<sup>447</sup>

Speaking of Petraeus, one should also mention the CIA’s Deputy Director Michael Morell, a veteran of the Agency who worked there for a total of 33 years and twice acted as head of the CIA (in July-September 2011 and in November 2012 – March 2013). After the resignation of Petraeus, Morell, a careerist, who “more than the directors he has served, understands how the agency works,”<sup>448</sup> was considered one of the most likely candidates to replace him.<sup>449</sup> Given the evidence that Morell managed to win Obama's trust and develop a close relationship with him.<sup>450</sup>, it can be assumed that Morell, both under Panetta and under Petraeus, also had a serious influence on the activities of the CIA.

Why might Morell be so interesting in the context of the Syrian case? Already after his resignation, in 2016, Morell during one of his interviews called on the American leadership to supply the Syrian rebels with weapons so that they would kill the Russian and Iranian military on the territory of the

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[https://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2045328\\_2045338\\_2049947,00.html](https://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2045328_2045338_2049947,00.html) (accessed: 18.01.2023)

<sup>445</sup> *Baker P.* Panetta’s Pentagon, Without the Blank Check // The New York Times. October 23, 2011. URL:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/24/us/at-pentagon-leon-panetta-charts-change-of-course.html> (accessed: 18.01.2023)

<sup>446</sup> *Panetta L.* Worthy Fights. New York: Penguin Press, 2014. P. 447-481.

<sup>447</sup> Nomination of General David H. Petraeus to be Director, Central Intelligence Agency // United States Senate Selected Committee on Intelligence. June 23, 2011. P. 10. URL: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-112shrg72743/pdf/CHRG-112shrg72743.pdf> (accessed: 18.01.2023)

<sup>448</sup> *Harris S.* Why Michael Morell Won’t Replace Petraeus As Director of the CIA // Washingtonian. November 13, 2012. URL: <https://www.washingtonian.com/2012/11/13/why-michael-morell-wont-replace-petraeus-as-director-of-the-cia/> (accessed: 18.01.2023)

<sup>449</sup> Tough choice for Obama on Petraeus’ successor // CNN. November 14, 2012. URL:

<https://edition.cnn.com/2012/11/13/opinion/bergen-petraeus-replacement/index.html> (accessed: 18.01.2023)

<sup>450</sup> Michael Morell or John Brennan may succeed Petraeus // USA Today. November 12, 2012. URL:

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2012/11/12/petraeus-successor/1700449/> (accessed: 18.01.2023)

country, moreover “covertly, so you don’t tell the world about it.”<sup>451</sup> It is hard to imagine that such martial moods appeared in Morell’s head only after leaving the service. Therefore, it is likely that he was at least one of the influential supporters of the implementation of the operation, which later became known as Timber Sycamore.

Finally, one more position in the US foreign policy establishment, the National Security Advisor, cannot be ignored. In 2009, quite unexpectedly for everyone, it was taken by General James Jones, who previously served as the commander of the US Marine Corps, Commander-in-Chief of NATO Forces in Europe. In addition, Jones has served as Chairman of the Independent Congressional Commission on Security Forces in Iraq, as well as Special Envoy for Security in the Middle East.

Jones, despite the high hopes placed on him as someone “unencumbered by strong ideological biases who can impartially evaluate ideas regardless of whether they come from the left or the right,”<sup>452</sup> did not last long on the Obama team. On the other hand, perhaps this was precisely the reason for his resignation in October 2010: in reality, it turned out that Obama and his “campaign headquarters” did not really need outside advice, which led to the fact that the general actually turned out to be in isolation.<sup>453</sup>

Jones was replaced by his deputy Tom Donilon, a member of the Obama team since the campaigning days, when he prepared him for the presidential foreign policy debate. In fact, as many attest, Donilon had been de facto acting for Jones at the NSC for several months before the reshuffle was officially announced.<sup>454</sup> Two facts speak rather eloquently about his foreign policy positions. Firstly, Donilon was an active supporter of the idea of “redistribution of resources and interests from Afghanistan, the Middle East and Europe towards Asia.”<sup>455</sup> Secondly, one of his top priorities was “maintaining the president's popularity and his re-election in the 2012 elections,”<sup>456</sup> which led to the fact that, at the beginning of the Syrian crisis, Obama “could not bear the pressure from the media during the pre-election period” and was “forced to make strong public statements,”<sup>457</sup> which were not followed by equally serious actions.

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<sup>451</sup> *Hussain M.* Ex-CIA Director Who Endorsed Clinton Calls For Killing Iranians And Russians In Syria // *The Intercept*. August 9, 2016. URL: <https://theintercept.com/2016/08/09/ex-cia-chief-who-endorsed-clinton-calls-for-killing-iranians-and-russians-in-syria/> (accessed: 18.01.2023)

<sup>452</sup> *Crowley M.* Man in the Mirror // *The New Republic*. December 31, 2008. URL: <https://newrepublic.com/article/62218/man-the-mirror> (accessed: 18.01.2023)

<sup>453</sup> See: *Kaplan F.* Good Man, Wrong Job. Why no one will miss Jim Jones, the departing national security adviser // *Slate*. October 8, 2010. URL: <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2010/10/why-no-one-will-miss-jim-jones-the-departing-national-security-adviser.html> (accessed: 18.01.2023); *Marsh K.* The Contemporary Presidency: The Administrator as Outsider: James Jones as National Security Advisor // *Presidential Studies Quarterly*. 2012. Vol. 42, No. 4. P. 827-842.

<sup>454</sup> *Lee C.L., Lubold G.* Donilon to replace Jones // *Politico*. October 8, 2010. URL: <https://www.politico.com/story/2010/10/donilon-to-replace-jones-043323> (accessed: 18.01.2023)

<sup>455</sup> *Horowitz J.* Is the Donilon Doctrine the new New World Order? // *The Washington Post*. December 21, 2010. URL: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/12/20/AR2010122005712.html> (accessed: 18.01.2023)

<sup>456</sup> *Snezhkov N.* Obama's Man (In Russ.) // *News Time*. October 11, 2010. URL: <http://www.vremya.ru/2010/185/5/262527.html> (accessed: 18.01.2023)

<sup>457</sup> *Litsas S.* US Foreign Policy in the Eastern Mediterranean. Springer, 2020. P. 144. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-030-36895-1



*Barack Obama second-term administration.* On February 1, 2013, Hillary Clinton was replaced by Senator John Kerry, who chaired hearings to consider her candidacy for this post four years ago as head of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. It is interesting to note that both Clinton, as a student at Wellesley College, and Kerry, who had just returned from service in the Navy, participated and even organized demonstrations against the Vietnam War (though in different years).

Kerry expressed his position on Syria on January 24 at a hearing in his native committee. In general, he did not say anything fundamentally new on the Syrian issue, voicing the theses of the official American position. The candidate for the Secretary of State said that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad “has made a set of judgments that are inexcusable, that are reprehensible” and that he “is not long for remaining as the head of state in Syria.”<sup>458</sup> Kerry noted that the United States has been documenting the gross human rights violations committed by the Syrian regime for decades and has been looking for ways to end them. One of them seems to have been support for Syrian dissidents before the events of the Arab Spring, mentioned here, which has only increased since its beginning and which will increase even more after Assad leaves.<sup>459</sup> However, as Kerry clarified slightly Jesuitically, the US “cannot and will not push for regime change in Syria,” but will only “stand firmly on the side of the Syrian people.”<sup>460</sup> The senator especially noted the role of Moscow, which the future Secretary of State was going to convince to “play a constructive role” in resolving the Syrian conflict.

Kerry also touched upon two issues that would play a huge role in the Syrian crisis in the future: Syrian chemical weapons, arguing that their stocks “remain under the control of the Syrian government,”<sup>461</sup> and threats from Islamic extremists. Regarding the second question, John Kerry stated that the United States is aware of the threat from the Islamists in Syria, and therefore supports only “moderate opposition”, while fighting the radicals, among whom he named both the Al-Nusra Front<sup>462</sup> and Iran.<sup>463</sup> He also said that Washington does not arm the “moderate opposition”, but only provides it with “non-lethal assistance,” and avoided answering the question about the possible bombing of military facilities of the Assad regime.<sup>464</sup>

A much more “debatable and controversial figure,”<sup>465</sup> according to the leading researcher of the Institute for the USA and Canada Alexey A. Popov, was Chuck Hagel, whom Obama nominated for the post of head of the Department of Defense. Hagel was a Republican who had retired from active political

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<sup>458</sup> Nomination of John F. Kerry to be Secretary of State // United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. January 24, 2013. P. 22. URL: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-113shrg86451/pdf/CHRG-113shrg86451.pdf> (accessed: 18.03.2023)

<sup>459</sup> Ibid. P. 78.

<sup>460</sup> Ibid. P. 139.

<sup>461</sup> Ibid. P. 79.

<sup>462</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>463</sup> Nomination of John F. Kerry... P. 154.

<sup>464</sup> Ibid. P. 191.

<sup>465</sup> Popov A. Second administration of Barack Obama (In Russ.) // USA & Canada: Economics, Politics, Culture. 2013, №6. P. 20.

life, and, moreover, occupied an extremely non-standard position for the American foreign policy establishment on the problems of the Middle East: he spoke from rather anti-Israeli positions and was inclined to negotiate with Iran, as well as Hamas and Hezbollah groups.

This led to serious debate in the Senate Committee on Armed Services, where on February 12, 2013, hearings were held regarding the appointment of Hagel. Regarding the Syrian issue, the candidate for Secretary of Defense also categorically supported Obama's course, saying that Assad “has lost his legitimacy and must leave in order to open the way for a political solution to the problem that will stop the bloodshed and satisfy the aspirations of the Syrian people.”<sup>466</sup> He advocated the continued provision of non-lethal, humanitarian and diplomatic assistance to the Syrian opposition; did not see the need for the supply of weapons to Syria, but did not rule out the fact that the situation could change over time. The Syrian opposition itself, in his opinion, was only eager to get rid of the “repressive leader,” and this regard their goals coincide with those of the United States. But Hagel also drew attention to the Al-Nusra Front<sup>467</sup>, whose goals were completely different.<sup>468</sup>

In addition, Hagel agreed with concerns about the safety of Syrian chemical weapons and allowed himself to be cautious about a possible intervention in Syria under the auspices of NATO if there was a danger to Türkiye, bordering Syria in the north<sup>469</sup>. Answering a question from Senator John McCain about the possibility of repeating the Libyan scenario in the country with the “establishment of a no-fly zone,” he noted that this is possible, but due to the strong Syrian air defense, this will be more risky and will require more effort.<sup>470</sup> On the issue of Iran's close ties to Syria, Hagel said that a fruitful relationship with the two countries would be possible “only after regime change in Syria and big changes in regime behavior in Tehran.”<sup>471</sup>

After Hagel's resignation in November 2014, the Pentagon was headed by Ashton Carter, who had previously been Deputy Secretary of Defense for more than three years. At his February 4, 2015 Senate Committee on Armed Services hearing, Carter said Washington's current response to the ISIS\* threat was appropriate, and that the main US strategy against the Islamic State\* should be to “enduring defeat,” which was impossible without ground forces operating in the region. In Syria, according to Carter, such forces should be a coalition of “moderate opposition” and “regional forces,”<sup>472</sup> by these, apparently, meant the FSA and the YPG.

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<sup>466</sup> Nominations before the Senate Armed Service Committee, first session, 113th Congress // United States Senate Armed Service Committee. January 31, 2013. P. 175. URL: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-113shrg87878/pdf/CHRG-113shrg87878.pdf> (accessed: 18.03.2023)

<sup>467</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>468</sup> Ibid. P. 217-218.

<sup>469</sup> Ibid. P. 176.

<sup>470</sup> Ibid. P. 264.

<sup>471</sup> Ibid. P. 260.

<sup>472</sup> Hearing to Consider the Nomination of Honorable Ashton B. Carter to be Secretary of Defense // United States Senate Committee on Armed Services. February 4, 2015. P. 32-33. URL: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-114shrg24274/pdf/CHRG-114shrg24274.pdf> (accessed: 18.03.2023)

Carter also drew the committee's attention to the fact that Syria's problem lies not only with ISIS\*<sup>473</sup>, but with Assad, but that the Syrian opposition needs to fight ISIS\* first. Interestingly, in response to this remark, the candidate for the post of the Pentagon's chief received an angry rebuke from Senator McCain, who called Assad the "father of ISIS\*," and naming ideas about possible cooperation in the fight against Islamists with Iran and the Syrian president an "idiocy"<sup>474</sup>.

Michael Morell, to his great regret, eventually was not nominated for the post of head of the CIA. Instead, John Brennan, former presidential adviser for homeland security, who had also been previously among the favorites, took this position on March 8, 2013.

In his March 7 Senate Select Committee on Intelligence hearing, Brennan made little to no mention of Syria. The only time he mentioned it was when he was talking about the threat from Al-Qaeda\*. According to this career intelligence officer, who worked for 25 years in the CIA (in the Middle East particularly, he was a specialist in that region), the United States should have taken a closer look at Syria, because its wide territories covered by a civil war could be used by "Al-Qaeda\* and other extremist forces."<sup>475</sup> However, there are a couple more touches to Brennan's portrait, such as his approving stance on "enhanced interrogation techniques"<sup>476</sup> or his passion for the widespread use of drones, which, despite CIA claims, often led to civilian casualties.<sup>477</sup>

Also worth mentioning is the position of National Security Advisor to the President. Susan Rice, who previously held the post of US ambassador to the UN, assumed this position on July 1, 2013. First of all, one must mention her role in the Libyan events of 2011 – it is considered a fact that it was she, along with Hillary Clinton and Samantha Power, who played a decisive role in the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which became the international justification for the intervention of the countries of the Western coalition to Libya.<sup>478</sup> Rice took the same tough position on Syria, speaking sharply about the position of China and Russia on the Syrian problem<sup>479</sup>.

Thus, after analyzing the composition of both Obama cabinets, we can conclude that the president tried to select personnel for his administration who were not in the mood for a direct aggravation of the foreign policy situation and drawing the United States into new military conflicts. However, this did not mean that they opposed indirect involvement in such conflicts, including through the supply of weapons

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<sup>473</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>474</sup> Hearing to Consider the Nomination... P. 109-110.

<sup>475</sup> Open Hearing: Nomination of John O. Brennan to be the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency // United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. March 7, 2013. P. 148. URL: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-113shrg80718/pdf/CHRG-113shrg80718.pdf> (accessed: 18.03.2023)

<sup>476</sup> Crowley M. John Brennan's zigzag on torture // Politico. December 9, 2014. URL: <https://www.politico.com/story/2014/12/john-brennan-cia-torture-113456> (accessed: 19.01.2023)

<sup>477</sup> Shane S. C.I.A. Is Disputed on Civilian Toll in Drone Strikes // The New York Times. August 11, 2011. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/12/world/asia/12drones.html> (accessed: 19.01.2023)

<sup>478</sup> Dreyfuss, B. Obama's Women Advisers Pushed War Against Libya // The Nation. March 19, 2011. URL:

<https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/obamas-women-advisers-pushed-war-against-libya/> (accessed: 19.01.2023)

<sup>479</sup> Popov A. Second administration of Barack Obama... (In Russ.). P. 23.

to the Syrian rebels. During the change of cabinets in early 2013, there was hope that Kerry, Hagel and Brennan would not rush to arm the Syrian opposition<sup>480</sup>, but, as subsequent events showed, this hope did not come true.

*Donald Trump administration.* As the first US Secretary of State under Donald Trump, Rex Tillerson could not boast any diplomatic experience at all but introduced a wealth of experience as the former CEO of ExxonMobil, one of the largest oil corporations in the world. During his tenure at ExxonMobil, Tillerson had extensive dealings with Russian oil companies and developed personal relationships with high-ranking officials such as Vladimir Putin and Igor Sechin, the head of Rosneft. However, some American media outlets suggested that those ties were corrupt ones<sup>481</sup>, which led to scrutiny from the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations.

During his Senate confirmation hearings, Rex Tillerson was repeatedly asked about Syria and had to address various issues related to the country from different perspectives. As a candidate for the Secretary of State position, Tillerson was required to present his overall vision for US strategy in the Middle East, including Syria. In his prepared statement, Tillerson primarily focused on the issue of Islamic State\*<sup>482</sup>, calling the military campaign against it “the most urgent step in crushing radical Islamism”<sup>483</sup> that posed a threat to the US and its allies. He also emphasized the importance of waging a “war of ideas” to counter Islamist ideology and turn Muslims around the world away from it.

However, the senators were keen to hear more about Tillerson's specific policy plans for Syria. Senator Isaacson, in particular, shared his perspective on the situation, noting that “Türkiye, Iran, and Russia are sitting at the table and sharing what is left of Syria,” and asked Tillerson how he would recommend the United States secure a seat at this table. Tillerson responded with a detailed answer, proposing that the US take the first step in restoring American leadership in the Middle East (implicitly criticizing the Obama administration's policies) by informing the countries in the region that the US was re-engaging and had a plan to shape events in Syria.

Tillerson emphasized the importance of restoring relations with Türkiye, which had turned to Russia in the absence of US leadership. He underscored the need to convey to Türkiye that a stable alliance cannot be formed with Russia but is possible to save one with the United States. Tillerson also highlighted the importance of strengthening ties with Israel, which is critical for US national security and plays a significant role in the region.

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<sup>480</sup> Ibid. P. 25-26.

<sup>481</sup> *Matthews O.* Meet Rex Tillerson, Vladimir Putin's Pal and Donald Trump's Nominee for Secretary of State // Newsweek. December 13, 2016. URL: <https://www.newsweek.com/2016/12/30/putin-tillerson-trump-exxonmobil-russia-secretary-state-washington-moscow-531590.html> (accessed: 17.02.2020)

<sup>482</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>483</sup> Nomination of Rex Tillerson to Be Secretary of State // United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. January 11, 2017. P. 23. URL: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-115shrg24573/pdf/CHRG-115shrg24573.pdf> (accessed: 18.03.2023)

Subsequently, the United States needed to formulate an action plan for Syria that would protect the civilian population from indiscriminate bombings, presumably by Russia and the Assad regime, and stabilize the flow of refugees. Tillerson suggested that the next step should be defeating ISIS\*<sup>484</sup>, acknowledging that the current administration in Syria had two competing goals of removing Bashar al-Assad and defeating ISIS\*, which conflicted with each other. Tillerson's first priority was defeating ISIS\*, followed by achieving stability in Syria, and only then addressing the question of Assad's departure. Furthermore, he believed that the US needed to ask the crucial question: "What's next?" and consider the governance structure of a new Syria and how the US could influence it.<sup>485</sup>

However, many senators were more interested in Tillerson's stance on the presence of Russia and Iran in Syria. Senators Rubio and Menendez repeatedly tried to elicit a direct admission from Tillerson that Putin was committing war crimes in Syria and were disappointed when he could not "recognize what is... already recognized around the world."<sup>486</sup> Despite this, Tillerson believed that Russia needed to focus more on targeting ISIS\* and not mix it with the Syrian opposition<sup>487</sup>. He also promised to maintain anti-Russian sanctions until Russia, among other things, ceases its war crimes in Syria<sup>488</sup>. Interestingly, Tillerson believed that the US and Russia should not cooperate directly in Syria, but instead, Russia could be convinced that "Assad's sectarian policy" and the strengthening of Iran's influence were not in its interests.<sup>489</sup>

Regarding Iran, Tillerson did not rule out possible cooperation in the fight against ISIS\*<sup>490</sup> but promised to find a political solution to prevent the use of Syrian territory in the interests of international terrorism, including Hezbollah, which threatens the US and its allies.<sup>491</sup> Tillerson also praised the combat capabilities of the Syrian Kurds and stated that the US values both Türkiye and the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) equally and plans to work closely with both.<sup>492</sup>

Besides, Tillerson avoided answering some questions directly, such as Senator Rubio's questions regarding the effectiveness of supplying the "moderate opposition" in Syria<sup>493</sup> and how does it affect the growth of ISIS\*<sup>494</sup>, as well as Senator Menendez's question about prospects for the establishment of a no-fly zone.<sup>495</sup> It is important to note that Tillerson's vague answers during the hearings could also be attributed to the fact that he was not yet serving in the State Department and did not have access to

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<sup>484</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>485</sup> Nomination of Rex Tillerson... P. 63-65.

<sup>486</sup> Ibid. P. 31.

<sup>487</sup> Ibid. P. 196.

<sup>488</sup> Ibid. P. 212.

<sup>489</sup> Ibid. P. 196, 252.

<sup>490</sup> Ibid. P. 129.

<sup>491</sup> Ibid. P. 194.

<sup>492</sup> Ibid. P. 281.

<sup>493</sup> Ibid. P. 217.

<sup>494</sup> Ibid. P. 220.

<sup>495</sup> Ibid. P. 233.

all the necessary information to formulate a concrete policy on Syria. Additionally, it is not uncommon for nominees to dodge certain questions to avoid committing to a specific stance before assuming the position. Furthermore, it is possible that Tillerson was trying to navigate between the uncertain and evolving foreign policy views of Donald Trump and hawkish Senate Committee's concerns.

In March 2018, then-President Trump announced via Twitter that he had fired his Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. John Sullivan briefly filled the position before being succeeded by Mike Pompeo in April. Pompeo had previously served as the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, and prior to that, spent six years as a member of the House of Representatives, where he was a member of the Select Committee on Intelligence. It is clear that Pompeo's background differed significantly from that of his predecessor.

Furthermore, Pompeo's stance on the Syrian issue surely differed from that of Tillerson's. While he did not mention ISIS\*<sup>496</sup> in his prepared statement, Pompeo took a strong position against Syria itself, referring to it as a “failed state” and highlighting the “growing threat to human rights, national security, and regional stability” it posed, deserving a “firm response.”<sup>497</sup> When questioned by Senator Portman, he placed most of the blame for the violence in Syria on the Assad government, accusing it of providing support to a range of terrorist organizations, including Hezbollah, Hamas, Al-Qaeda\*, and even ISIS\*<sup>498</sup>.

In contrast, when discussing the United States' strategy in Syria, Pompeo emphasized that the primary objective was and continues to be the enduring defeat of ISIS\*, which, while weakened, had not yet been entirely vanquished. He noted that the next goal for the United States should have been to achieve a diplomatic resolution to the conflict in order to bring stability to the country. However, the most challenging and critical aspect of this effort would be to establish a “post-Assad Syria,” which, in Pompeo's view, should be achieved through free and fair elections conducted by the Syrian people themselves.<sup>499</sup>

During the hearings, members of the Senate Committee primarily focused on two key issues: the legality of President Trump's strikes on Syrian government targets and the possibility of withdrawing troops from Syria. On both topics, Pompeo took a position that aimed to defend the actions of the Trump administration. Regarding the first issue, Pompeo cited the historical precedent of past presidents from both parties using similar levels of force without issue.<sup>500</sup>, as well as the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF). When Senator Murphy pushed for a clearer legislative basis, Pompeo invoked Article II of the US Constitution.<sup>501</sup> However, when asked about the legal basis for the presence of

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<sup>496</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>497</sup> Nomination of Hon. Mike Pompeo to Be Secretary of State // United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. April 12, 2018. P. 17. URL: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-115shrg29844/pdf/CHRG-115shrg29844.pdf> (accessed: 18.03.2023)

<sup>498</sup> Ibid. P. 112.

<sup>499</sup> Ibid. P. 73.

<sup>500</sup> Ibid. P. 46-48.

<sup>501</sup> Ibid. P. 62.

American troops in Syria to contain Iranian influence, Pompeo struggled to provide a clear answer. He only acknowledged that the situation was “complicated” and “becomes much more difficult.”<sup>502</sup>

Notably, Senator Paul highlighted an interesting fact during the hearing: In 2011 with respect to Libya and in 2013 regarding Syria, then-Representative Pompeo had argued that President Obama should have obtained congressional authorization before engaging in military action, not to prevent it, but to support it. Senator Paul expressed concern that Pompeo might advocate for a more conventional and aggressive military policy under the Trump administration.<sup>503</sup>

Regarding the potential withdrawal of US troops from Syria, Pompeo pointed to his earlier statements regarding the administration's overall strategy in the country. He emphasized that while the defeat of the caliphate was nearly achieved, it was time to reassess the American military and civilian presence in Syria. However, Pompeo stressed that any such process must prioritize the interests of the United States as well as those of their Coalition partners.<sup>504</sup>

During the hearings, Pompeo also touched upon several other issues that were in some way connected to the problem of Syria, such as Russian involvement, Iranian influence, and the Kurdish-Turkish conflict. He criticized Russia for supporting Syria and spreading false information about the US and Coalition ties to ISIS\*<sup>505</sup>, which complicated efforts to resolve the conflict. However, Pompeo also echoed Tillerson's approach to cooperating with Russia to counter Iranian influence.<sup>506</sup> In regards to Iran, Pompeo emphasized the need for sanctions and containment, and urged against allowing Iran to supplant the Geneva peace process with that of Astana.<sup>507</sup> With regards to the Kurdish-Turkish conflict, Pompeo pledged to include the Kurds in Syria's future, but also acknowledged the importance of working with Türkiye to ensure its interests in Syria were considered.<sup>508</sup> Overall, Pompeo's stance appeared to be more hawkish than his predecessor Tillerson, despite the latter's rhetoric being more aligned with President Trump's.

Moving on to the US Secretaries of Defense, shortly after winning the 2016 presidential election, Donald Trump announced his intention to nominate James Mattis to the position. Mattis, a retired four-star general from the Marine Corps, had gained a reputation for his tough approach and leadership during his military career. He had also earned the nickname “Mad Dog” for his role in the violent suppression of the Sunni insurgency in Fallujah, Iraq in 2004.

Regrettably, the topic of Syria received scant attention during the confirmation hearings. General Mattis only mentioned Syria once, in response to Senator Nelson's question about his advice on US

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<sup>502</sup> Ibid. P. 91-92.

<sup>503</sup> Ibid. P. 60.

<sup>504</sup> Ibid. P. 112.

<sup>505</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>506</sup> Nomination of Hon. Mike Pompeo... P. 164.

<sup>507</sup> Ibid. P. 159.

<sup>508</sup> Ibid. P. 263.

actions in Iraq and Syria, which differed from the Obama administration's approach. Mattis asserted that the new administration's most significant difference would be their eagerness to implement political goals for these countries “as quickly as possible.”<sup>509</sup> Additionally, during his hearings, Mattis addressed the issue of congressional approval of the use of military forces by the US President, which he had previously raised in his article from March 2015. In this article, he proposed that Congress pass a new joint AUMF resolution to demonstrate national unity and to deal more decisively with the Islamist threat.<sup>510</sup> During the hearing, Mattis affirmed that he still stands by this position.<sup>511</sup>, which may have contributed to his almost unanimous confirmation by the US Senate (98 out of 100).<sup>512</sup>

Following the departure of General Mattis, who resigned due to his opposition to Trump's Syria troop withdrawal decision, the US Secretary of Defense position was temporarily filled by Patrick Shanahan for over six months. Eventually, Mark Esper was selected as the new Secretary of Defense. Esper's background, which includes serving in the Gulf War with the 101st Airborne Division, working in the US Senate and Department of Defense, and previously serving as Secretary of the Army, made him a highly suitable candidate for the role.

During Esper's confirmation hearings, the topic of Syria was brought up twice. In the first instance, the conversation revolved around the legal justification for the US's actions against ISIS\* in Syria. Esper took a stance that differed from Mattis's, but was largely in agreement with Pompeo's. He asserted that the 2001 AUMF resolution provided a sufficient legal basis for US military action in Syria, and cautioned against adopting a new resolution that could potentially jeopardize the existing legal framework and lead to unnecessary risks.<sup>513</sup>

During the second instance where Syria was discussed in Esper's hearings, he was questioned about the broader US strategy in the region. He outlined three main objectives that he believed the strategy should aim to achieve: firstly, the permanent defeat of ISIS\*; secondly, the implementation of a UN Security Council Resolution 2254-compliant political process; and thirdly, the withdrawal of Iranian forces from Syrian territory. To achieve the first objective, Esper suggested several measures, including addressing the root causes of political, social, and economic grievances that ISIS\* exploited to gain support, working closely with local partners such as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to defend

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<sup>509</sup> Confirmation Hearing on the Expected Nomination of Mr. James N. Mattis to be Secretary of Defense // United States Senate Committee on Armed Services. January 12, 2017. P. 136. URL: [https://www.defensedaily.com/wp-content/uploads/post\\_attachment/154422.pdf](https://www.defensedaily.com/wp-content/uploads/post_attachment/154422.pdf) (accessed: 18.03.2023)

<sup>510</sup> *Mattis J.* Using Military Force Against ISIS\* // Hoover Institution. March 4, 2015. URL: <https://www.hoover.org/research/using-military-force-against-isis> (accessed: 21.02.2020) (with \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked)

<sup>511</sup> Confirmation Hearing on the Expected... P. 109.

<sup>512</sup> *Lamothe D.* James Mattis is sworn in as defense secretary, pledges to build alliances // The Washington Post. January 20, 2017. URL: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/01/20/senate-confirms-retired-gen-james-mattis-as-defense-secretary-breaking-with-decades-of-precedent/> (accessed: 21.02.2020)

<sup>513</sup> Advance Policy Questions for Dr. Mark T. Esper, Nominee for Appointment to be Secretary of Defense // United States Senate Committee on Armed Services. July 16, 2019. P. 13-14.



Syrian territory against potential Islamist insurgencies, and calling on Coalition allies to contribute more to the shared effort.

Esper also commented on the presence of US troops in northeast Syria, stating that they would remain there as part of a multinational force to sustain the ongoing campaign against ISIS<sup>514, 515</sup>. However, due to security concerns, he refrained from disclosing the exact number of troops or a timeline for their withdrawal. Esper also acknowledged the significance of curbing Russia's influence in the Middle East, underscoring that the US's actions in the region serve this purpose<sup>516</sup>. Overall, these statements suggest that Esper's appointment as Secretary of Defense was intended to provide a more pro-presidential perspective compared to Mattis, while still aligning with the broader US policy objectives in the region.

Finally, it is worth paying attention to President Trump's numerous National Security Advisors. Lieutenant General Michael Flynn was the first one to take this position. Under Obama he served as director of the US Department of Defense Intelligence Agency in 2012-2014, where he unsuccessfully tried to draw the attention to the dominance of the Islamists in the Syrian opposition and the danger of a policy of overthrowing Bashar al-Assad<sup>517</sup>. In addition, Flynn was focused on constructive cooperation on Syria with Russia<sup>518</sup> and at the same time was negative towards Iran and Muslims in general<sup>519</sup>. It's obvious that in this respect the views of the president and his advisor coincided completely, but the alleged ties with Russia ruined the general's career, which led to his resignation just 24 days after the appointment.

The next head of the NSC was Lieutenant General Herbert McMaster, a "military intellectual"<sup>520</sup> who proved himself during the Gulf War, as well as in Afghanistan and Iraq. McMaster was the exact opposite of Flynn, being more hawkish about Russia, and, on the contrary, much more favorable to Muslims<sup>521</sup> and being a supporter of staying in the "nuclear deal."<sup>522</sup> The general's approach also manifested itself in Syria, where missile strikes on government targets followed in connection with an

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<sup>514</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>515</sup> Advance Policy Questions... P. 25-26.

<sup>516</sup> Ibid. P. 26.

<sup>517</sup> *Hersh S.* Military to Military // London Review of Books. January 7, 2016. URL: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v38/n01/seymour-m.-hersh/military-to-military> (accessed: 11.02.2023)

<sup>518</sup> *Gebauer M., Stark H.* 'We Were Too Dumb' // Der Spiegel. November 29, 2015. URL: <https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/former-us-intelligence-chief-discusses-development-of-is-a-1065131.html> (accessed: 11.02.2023)

<sup>519</sup> *Ricks T.E.* I worked at Flynn's DIA, and I fear that he will put us on the road to war with Iran // Foreign Policy. December 7, 2016. URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/12/07/i-worked-at-flynn-s-dia-and-i-fear-that-he-will-put-us-on-the-road-to-war-with-iran/> (accessed: 11.02.2023)

<sup>520</sup> *Pengelly M.* HR McMaster on serving Trump: 'If you're not on the pitch, you're going to get your ass kicked' // The Guardian. October 3, 2020. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/oct/03/hr-mcmaster-donald-trump-national-security-adviser-battlefields-book> (accessed: 11.02.2023)

<sup>521</sup> *Lockie A.* Trump's new national security adviser is hawkish on Russia – a big reversal from Michael Flynn // Insider. February 21, 2017. URL: <https://www.businessinsider.com/mcmaster-reversal-michael-flynn-national-security-council-russia-hawk-2017-2> (accessed: 11.02.2023)

<sup>522</sup> *Sanger D.E., Erlanger S.* Trump Is Expected to Leave Iran Deal, Allies Say // The New York Times. May 7, 2018. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/07/us/politics/trump-announce-withdraw-us-iran-deal.html> (accessed: 11.02.2023)

alleged chemical attack a month and a half after his appointment.<sup>523</sup> In addition, McMaster soon revived the thesis about the need to overthrow the regime of Bashar al-Assad.<sup>524</sup>

All this clearly did not fit in with the plans of the president, which resulted in the resignation of McMaster in the spring of 2018 and the appointment to this position of “the most dangerous man we had in the entire eight years of the Bush Administration”<sup>525</sup> – John Bolton. Bolton advocated an uncompromising struggle against those he saw as opponents of the United States. They also included, of course, Russia, Iran and Syria, which he personally included in 2002 in Bush's “axis of evil.”<sup>526</sup>

Regarding the Syrian conflict, Bolton believed that it was only a “symptom,” while “the real threat is the regime in Tehran.” In this regard, he criticized the Obama administration, which, in his opinion, did not take sufficient action in Syria, fearing to derail the “nuclear deal.”<sup>527</sup> It is also worth noting that in the early days of the conflict, Bolton advocated rather idealistically for the support of the United States for “Syrian rebel leaders who are truly secular and who oppose radical Islam; who will disavow Al-Qaeda\*<sup>528</sup>, Hezbollah, and other terrorist groups; and who will reject Russian and Iranian hegemony over their country.”<sup>529</sup>

It was predictable that such a radical position of the hardline Bolton could not help but lead to their break with Trump, which ultimately happened in the fall of 2019. His place was taken by his complete opposite at first glance – a relatively little-known “team player with ‘affable behavior’” Robert O'Brien, who has worked at the State Department since the early 2000s and served as Special Envoy for Hostage Affairs under Trump.<sup>530</sup> However, others called him “a lighter version of Bolton,” with whom he had previously worked together at the UN. O'Brien's 2016 book “While America Slept: Restoring American Leadership to a World in Crisis” speaks loudest about O'Brien's foreign policy positions. In this book he

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<sup>523</sup> *McAskill E.* Trump's security chief shaped by tough posting near Syria // The Guardian. April 7, 2017. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/07/trumps-security-chief-shaped-by-tough-posting-near-syria> (accessed: 19.07.2023)

<sup>524</sup> *Gajanan M.* National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster: U.S. Wants to Eliminate 'Murderous Regime' in Syria // Time. April 9, 2017. URL: <https://time.com/4732401/hr-mcmaster-donald-trump-syria/> (accessed: 11.02.2023)

<sup>525</sup> *Woody C.* National security adviser H.R. McMaster is out; John Bolton set to replace him // Insider. March 23, 2018. URL: <https://www.businessinsider.com/hr-mcmaster-trump-fired-2018-3> (accessed: 11.02.2023)

<sup>526</sup> *Bolton J.* Beyond the Axis of Evil: Additional Threats from Weapons of Mass Destruction // The Heritage Foundation. May 6, 2002. URL: <https://www.heritage.org/defense/report/beyond-the-axis-evil-additional-threats-weapons-mass-destruction-0> (accessed: 11.02.2023)

<sup>527</sup> *Schreck C.* On The Record: John Bolton, Trump's New Pick For National-Security Adviser // Radio Free Europe. March 23, 2018. URL: <https://www.rferl.org/a/on-the-record-john-bolton-trump-foreign-policy-views/29117206.html> (accessed: 11.02.2023)

<sup>528</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>529</sup> *Bolton J.* What to Do about Syria? // The National Review. June 11, 2012. URL: <https://www.nationalreview.com/2012/06/what-do-about-syria-john-r-bolton/> (accessed: 11.02.2023)

<sup>530</sup> *Zeballos-Roig J.* Meet Robert C. O'Brien, Trump's new national security adviser and a former hostage negotiator who monitored A\$AP Rocky's trial in Sweden // Insider. September 18, 2019. URL: <https://www.businessinsider.com/meet-robert-c-obrien-trumps-new-national-security-adviser-2019-9> (accessed: 12.02.2023)

criticizes Obama's foreign policy, including the Iran deal, comparing it with the appeasement of Hitler before the World War II, and wary of the Russian leadership and its ambitions.<sup>531</sup>

Obviously, Trump's first Secretaries of State and Secretaries of Defense, while at first sight ideally suited to the foreign policy he proposed, were completely unsuited to the realities of his presidency. Tillerson and Mattis were not able to contain and appease Trump for long, being as stubborn and strong persons as he was. Their replacement with the more loyal Pompeo and Esper was quite natural. As for National Security Advisors, it is quite difficult to single out any principle according to which the president chose people for this position.

*Joe Biden administration.* Traditionally, the position of the US Secretary of State will be the first to be considered. That position in the Biden administration was filled by Anthony (Tony) Blinken, whose association with Joe Biden, then just a senator, began during the presidency of George W. Bush. At that time Blinken was staff director of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, chaired by Biden. Then, when Barack Obama (by the way, also a member of the Committee of Foreign Relations in 2005-2008) chose Biden as his candidate for Vice President, Blinken took part in their election campaign, for which he was rewarded with the positions of, first, National Security Advisor to the Vice President (2009-2013), then Deputy National Security Advisor to the President (2013-2015) and finally Deputy Secretary of State (2015-2017).<sup>532</sup>

It is worth noting that already during the Obama presidency, Tony Blinken had a serious influence on the formation of US policy in Syria. In particular, in 2013, during the Syrian chemical weapons crisis, he took a tougher stance than his patron Joe Biden, while at the same time towing the party line and not questioning Obama's final decision not to strike on Syria without Congressional approval<sup>533</sup>. Blinken then also publicly defended Obama's plans to train and equip the Syrian opposition, calling it “not the most effective way to go to send the hundreds of thousands of the American ground troops,” while deeming a much more effective approach in which “local people are fighting for their own country.”<sup>534</sup> In general, Blinken's foreign policy views can be described as “centrist and realist, but with a stronger interventionist vein.”<sup>535</sup>

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<sup>531</sup> *Glasser S.B.* “It Won’t End Well”: Trump and His Obscure New National-Security Chief // *The New Yorker*. September 19, 2019. URL: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/letter-from-trumps-washington/it-wont-end-well-trump-and-his-obscure-new-national-security-chief> (accessed: 12.02.2023)

<sup>532</sup> Biden picks loyal lieutenant to lead mission to restore US reputation on world stage // *CNN*. November 24, 2020. URL: <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/11/23/politics/blinken-biden-secstate-candidate/index.html> (accessed: 07.02.2023)

<sup>533</sup> *Horowitz J.* Antony Blinken steps into the spotlight with Obama administration role // *The Washington Post*. September 15, 2013. URL: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/antony-blinken-steps-into-the-spotlight-with-obama-administration-role/2013/09/15/7484a5c0-1e20-11e3-94a2-6c66b668ea55\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/antony-blinken-steps-into-the-spotlight-with-obama-administration-role/2013/09/15/7484a5c0-1e20-11e3-94a2-6c66b668ea55_story.html) (accessed: 07.02.2023)

<sup>534</sup> W.H. defends plan to arm Syrian rebels // *CNN*. September 18, 2014. URL: <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/bestoftv/2014/09/18/house-approves-aid-to-syrian-rebels-blinken-interview-newday.cnn> (accessed: 07.02.2023)

<sup>535</sup> *Horowitz J.* Antony Blinken steps...

Blinken described his future approach to the Syrian conflict from similar positions during hearings in the US Congress. Among the goals and interests of the United States in Syria, the candidate named:

- preventing the resurgence of ISIS\*<sup>536</sup>;
- maintaining pressure on Al-Qaeda\*-affiliated groups;
- preventing a renewal of fighting that produces large-scale refugee flow that further destabilize US partners and allies;
- promoting the provision of life-saving humanitarian aid to Syrian civilians in need;
- securing reforms in Damascus that improve the welfare of Syrian civilians;
- preventing the outbreak of broader regional conflict<sup>537</sup>.

Blinken highlighted the role of UNSCR 2254: he promised to work with US allies and partners, support the work of the Constitutional Committee and work with the UN Special Envoy for Syria, and seek a political solution to the conflict that should “address the root causes that led to almost ten years of civil war.”<sup>538</sup> In addition, Blinken spoke out in support of lawmakers on the Caesar Act issue, noting that he would be consulting with Congress on “building expectations for a change in regime behavior in Damascus.”<sup>539</sup>

Blinken did not ignore the problem of the Islamic State\*. He noted that ISIS\* is still a problem for the US, because of its use of the instability in Iraq and Syria for its own purposes, which requires to “revive American involvement” in the fight against it through cooperation with allies in the Global Coalition<sup>540</sup>. Blinken also advocated a “final decision” regarding captured former ISIS\* fighters and their families held in camps under the control of the SDF, such as the Al-Hol camp, but did not dare to specify in what form and whether the repatriation of foreign citizens from these camps.<sup>541</sup>

A large block of Blinken's answers was devoted to interaction with US allies and adversaries on the Syrian track:

- Türkiye has been described by Blinken as “an ally that in many ways... is not acting as an ally should,”<sup>542</sup> but with which the US has “common interests.”<sup>543</sup> Curiously, both of these characteristics also apply to the interaction of both countries over Syria: Türkiye did not behave as an ally of the United States in relation to the Kurdish units from SDF; at the same time, both Ankara and Washington were interested in settling the Syrian conflict (of course, on their own

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<sup>536</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>537</sup> Nomination of Hon. Antony J. Blinken to Be Secretary of State – Part I // U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. January 19, 2021. P. 397-398. URL: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-117shrg43890/pdf/CHRG-117shrg43890.pdf> (accessed: 07.02.2023)

<sup>538</sup> Ibid. P. 398.

<sup>539</sup> Ibid. P. 399.

<sup>540</sup> Ibid. P. 412.

<sup>541</sup> Ibid. P. 398.

<sup>542</sup> Ibid. P. 81.

<sup>543</sup> Ibid. P. 461.

terms). Blinken noted that US support for SDF is necessary and unwavering, but that Türkiye's concerns are understandable and justified, and both sides will continue consultations on the issue.<sup>544</sup>

- On Russia, Blinken said the administration “will be open to dialogue... on Syria as long as it contributes to protecting civilians and to credibly moving the conflict toward a political solution.” It was also noted that the United States and Russia will continue to interact within the framework of deconflicting<sup>545</sup>.
- Asked whether the new administration supports the US recognition of Israel's sovereignty over the Golan made during the Trump administration in March 2019, Blinken responded affirmatively, arguing that “as long as Bashar al-Assad is in control of Syria, it would be irresponsible to urge Israel to part with the Golan heights.”<sup>546</sup>
- The hearing also raised the issue of potential rapprochement between the Arab countries and Syria, using the example of the United Arab Emirates. Blinken said he was concerned about any reports of a normalization of relations with Syria, while reassuring senators that the United States has many tools at its disposal to curb such eagerness on the part of governments and business elites of other countries.<sup>547</sup>

It is interesting to note that during the hearings, Iranian influence and US-Iranian rivalry in Syria were hardly discussed. This factor was only touched upon here indirectly. Twice it mentioned in the context of supporting Israel that views the Iranian presence near its borders as a security threat<sup>548</sup>. And only once did senators try to catch Blinken on his own words, which he said in 2017, that President Hassan Rouhani “seeks to moderate Iran's international behavior.” To this, Blinken responded that President Biden “is committed to countering Iran’s destabilizing activities,” and that the latter “intensified its regional provocations, significantly increasing its direct and indirect targeting on our forces, diplomats, and assets” since the US withdrawal from the JCPOA.<sup>549</sup>

Despite the fact that, in general, Blinken's hearings went fairly smoothly, he had to face some criticism from both sides, and, interestingly, just along the line of Syria. From the non-interventionist point of view Blinken was attacked by the well-known critic of US foreign policy Rand Paul, who called him a “consistent supporter of military interventions” along with Joe Biden himself and Hillary Clinton. According to him, the American foreign policy establishment, to which the senator rightly ranked

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<sup>544</sup> Ibid. P. 398-399.

<sup>545</sup> Ibid. P. 398.

<sup>546</sup> Ibid. P. 395.

<sup>547</sup> Ibid. P. 406.

<sup>548</sup> Nomination of Hon. Antony J. Blinken to Be Secretary of State – Part II // U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. January 19, 2021. P. 1347, 1361. URL: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-117shrg43891/pdf/CHRG-117shrg43891.pdf> (accessed: 07.02.2023)

<sup>549</sup> Ibid. P. 1360-1361.

Blinken, sought to repeat in Syria what happened in Iraq and Libya, because it had “too clear a consensus” on regime change. Blinken tried to justify himself by saying that he was against a full-scale intervention in Syria along the Iraqi model, but Paul responded by accusing him of creating, together with Clinton, a failed training program for Syrian “moderate rebels,” who at that time no longer existed but there were only jihadists.<sup>550</sup>

On the other hand, accusations of a rather insufficiently decisive approach to the implementation of foreign policy followed from Senator John Barrasso. He noted that he was concerned about Blinken's involvement in the “misguided foreign policy of the Obama-Biden administration.”<sup>551</sup> He did not forget to mention Syria, referring to the words from the sensational interview of Blinken himself, where he admitted that the then administration “failed to prevent a horrific loss of life... and massive displacement,” and that is “something that I will take with me for the rest of my days.”<sup>552</sup> In addition, Barrasso referred to a statement the late Senator McCain made at a 2014 hearing when Blinken was nominated for the post of Deputy Secretary of State. Then McCain accused Blinken and the entire Obama administration of insufficient support for the “moderate opposition” and refusal to attack the “butcher Assad.” McCain concluded by calling Blinken “a threat to the traditional interests and values that embody the United States of America.”<sup>553</sup>

Despite criticism from both the left and the right, Blinken was still confirmed by the Senate as Secretary of State, albeit with a not-so-great result of 78-22.<sup>554</sup> Much more successful were the hearings of his future colleague, the contender for the post of Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, who became the first black chief of Pentagon. Like Donald Trump, Biden nominated a combat general for this position, moreover, the one who also had extensive experience in the Middle East operations: in 2003-2005 Austin served in Afghanistan, in 2010-2011 he commanded US forces in Iraq, and in 2013-2016 he was the head of CENTCOM and led the operation against the Islamic State\*<sup>555</sup>. During this period, Austin met Biden, with whom they spent “countless hours... in the field and in the White House Situation Room.”<sup>556</sup> Thus, the retired four-star general was also chosen for this post, largely due to the “deep personal connection” with the new owner of the White House.<sup>557</sup>

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<sup>550</sup> Nomination of Hon. Antony J. Blinken... P. 52-54.

<sup>551</sup> Ibid. P. 45.

<sup>552</sup> Transcript: Joe Biden foreign policy adviser Antony Blinken on COVID shortfalls, failures in Syria // CBS News. May 20, 2020. URL: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/transcript-joe-biden-foreign-policy-adviser-antony-blinken-on-covid-shortfalls-failures-in-syria/> (accessed: 07.02.2023)

<sup>553</sup> Nomination of Hon. Antony J. Blinken... P. 126-128.

<sup>554</sup> Senate confirms Antony Blinken as 71st secretary of state // AP News. January 27, 2021. URL: <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-donald-trump-biden-cabinet-antony-blinken-cabinets-d74929057a9e8e5f74e0ee553a6baced> (accessed: 08.02.2023)

<sup>555</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>556</sup> *Biden J.* Why I Chose Lloyd Austin as Secretary of Defense // The Atlantic. December 8, 2020. URL: <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/12/secretary-defense/617330/> (accessed: 08.02.2023)

<sup>557</sup> *Bender B., Seligman L.* Questions swirl over Austin's limited experience // Politico. December 8, 2020. URL: <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/12/09/lloyd-austin-experience-record-443818/> (accessed: 08.02.2023)

During the Senate Armed Services Committee hearings, Austin barely touched on the Syrian issue. The only thing that can be noted is his emphasis on interaction with allies which during the campaign against ISIS\*<sup>558</sup> “brought valuable capabilities to the battlefield”<sup>559</sup>, which can be regarded as a nod to the SDF.

At the same time, it is interesting to note the mixed successes of General Austin in the fight against ISIS\*, of which he was one of the main organizers. Firstly, it is largely due to the fact that at the beginning of 2014 CENTCOM underestimated the danger from the Islamic State\*, which in the mouth of Austin turned into just a “flash in the pan”, and in Obama’s interpretation, into a “jayvee team,”<sup>560</sup> by the summer it had successfully turned into a threat of a global scale. In the fall of 2014, when the anti-ISIS\* campaign was already in full swing, the head of CENTCOM showed himself to be an obvious apologist for the “Iraq-first” strategy<sup>561</sup>, the political essence of which we will analyze in detail in the second chapter. Finally, the very implementation of this strategy raised questions from the public and, in particular, from congressmen. A vivid example of this was the hearings held in September 2015 in the Senate Armed Services Committee, during which Austin had to admit to the actual failure of the Train-and-Equip operation, which, according to the general, resulted in 60 trained fighters on at that moment only 4-5 people acted “in the field.”<sup>562, 563</sup> Thus, Austin was literally the personification of military policy in Syria during the Obama’s second term.

In the context of the priorities of the new American leadership on Syria, attention should also be paid to the figure of the US ambassador to the UN. Biden appointed to the position Linda Thomas-Greenfield, a career diplomat who under Obama served as Ambassador to Liberia (2008-2012), Director General of the Foreign Service and Director of Human Resources (2012-2013), and Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs (2013-2017) but retired under Trump.

At her hearings before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Thomas-Greenfield repeatedly touched on the Syrian issue. It is curious to note that some of the wording of her answers literally reproduced similar remarks by Tony Blinken; in particular, this concerned issues of cooperation with

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<sup>558</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>559</sup> Nomination of Lloyd J. Austin III to be Secretary of Defense // U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services. January 19, 2021. P. 105. URL: [https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/21-02\\_01-19-20211.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/21-02_01-19-20211.pdf) (accessed: 08.02.2023)

<sup>560</sup> *Goldberg J.* The Obama Doctrine...

<sup>561</sup> *Ackerman S.* US stresses Iraq emphasis even as air strikes escalate against Isis\* in Syria // *The Guardian*. October 17, 2014. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/17/us-lloyd-austin-iraq-emphasis-airstrikes-isis-syria-kobani> \* (accessed: 08.02.2023)

<sup>562</sup> United States Strategy and Military Operations to Counter the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant\* and United States Policy Towards Iraq and Syria // U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services. September 16, 2015. P. 135. URL: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-114shrg21326/pdf/CHRG-114shrg21326.pdf> (accessed: 08.02.2023)

<sup>563</sup> At the same time, it should be noted that during these hearings, Austin also had to face the radical interventionism of Senator McCain, who insisted on the creation of a no-fly zone and buffer zone in Syria to protect refugees from “attacks and slaughter by Bashar al-Assad.” In response, Austin noted that this must be a political decision, and that such decisions (especially the second one) would require the expenditure of much more resources, as well as the introduction of ground forces. For details see: *Ibid.* P. 132-133.

Russia and Türkiye<sup>564</sup>, work within the framework of UNSCR 2254<sup>565</sup>, as well as the Golan Heights<sup>566</sup>. At the same time, some of the questions and, accordingly, the answers of Thomas-Greenfield were specific to her as a candidate for the post of ambassador to the UN. Thus, the issues of humanitarian border crossings were repeatedly raised, through which humanitarian aid was delivered to the rebel-controlled territories as cross-border assistance. In her responses, the diplomat promised to make efforts to achieve the reopening of three border crossings closed in 2020<sup>567</sup>, as well as “to restore American leadership in the provision of humanitarian assistance.”<sup>568</sup>

Finally, it is worth highlighting the views of Jake Sullivan, President Biden's National Security Advisor, whom the latter described as a man with a “once-in-a-generation intellect.”<sup>569</sup> Indeed, Sullivan's list of accomplishments is impressive: a Rhodes Scholar, a graduate of Yale and Oxford, who at 35 became Hillary Clinton's Director of Policy Planning and then succeeded Tony Blinken as National Security Advisor to the Vice President.

Opinions vary about Sullivan's foreign policy views. For some, he represents a moderate center “interested in projecting American strength in relation to adversaries... but also open to cooperation in certain areas.”<sup>570</sup> For others, Sullivan is “a product of Washington’s insular foreign policy establishment, a cohort whose traditional support for muscular U.S. foreign policy interventions has fallen out of favor across the political spectrum in the aftermath of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.”<sup>571</sup> Finally, for the third he is the man of Hillary Clinton, who once called him “a potential future president of the United States,”<sup>572</sup> the personification of her hawkish policy, and at the same time the ability to show “situational flexibility.”<sup>573</sup> From all this, however, one conclusion follows – Sullivan is a man of action, but preferring to act from a position of strength.

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<sup>564</sup> Nomination of Hon. Linda Thomas-Greenfield to Be United States Representative to the United Nations // U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. January 27, 2021. P. 64. URL: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-117shrg45209/pdf/CHRG-117shrg45209.pdf> (accessed: 08.02.2023)

<sup>565</sup> Ibid. P. 63.

<sup>566</sup> Ibid. P. 93.

<sup>567</sup> Ibid. P. 23.

<sup>568</sup> Ibid. P. 64.

<sup>569</sup> *Labott E.* The Sullivan Model // Foreign Policy. April 9, 2021. URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/09/the-sullivan-model-jake-nsc-biden-adviser-middle-class/> (accessed: 08.02.2023)

<sup>570</sup> *Hanania R.* China, not Biden picks Antony Blinken and Jake Sullivan, will dictate U.S. foreign policy // NBC News. November 24, 2020. URL: <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/china-not-biden-picks-antony-blinken-jake-sullivan-will-dictate-ncna1248683> (accessed: 08.02.2023)

<sup>571</sup> *Leibovich M.* Jake Sullivan, Biden’s Adviser, a Figure of Fascination and Schadenfreude // The New York Times. November 30, 2020. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/30/us/politics/jake-sullivan-biden.html> (accessed: 08.02.2023)

<sup>572</sup> Hillary Clinton’s Remarks at FP’s ‘Transformational Trends’ Forum // Foreign Policy. November 30, 2012. URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/11/30/hillary-clintons-remarks-at-fps-transformational-trends-forum/> (accessed: 08.02.2023)

<sup>573</sup> *Allen J.* Meet Jake Sullivan, the man behind hawkish Hillary Clinton's foreign policy // Vox. September 4, 2015. URL: <https://www.vox.com/2015/5/11/8569345/hillary-clinton-hawkish-foreign-policy> (accessed: 08.02.2023)



Sullivan's "Syrian dossier" also confirms this conclusion. It was he who was one of the first authors of the idea of arming the Syrian rebels.<sup>574</sup>, and also spoke in support of the idea of retaliatory strikes on Syria in 2013 after the Ghouta incident and was "shocked when Obama, who had been on the verge of ordering airstrikes, changed his mind."<sup>575</sup> Sullivan did not change his views seven years later, when he said that "very limited direct military action – for example, in response to the gassing" – could lead to a "potentially positive outcome."<sup>576</sup> At the same time, Sullivan believed that, in general, the approach of the American administration to the conflict as a whole should have been different, since the goals set did not correspond to the measures taken – the United States should have either switch to the "Assad must go" approach much earlier, or limit itself to striving for more advantageous position at the negotiating table, while in any case getting more actively involved in the conflict. Finally, one cannot help but recall the sensational e-mail sent by Sullivan Clinton on February 12, 2012, in which he wrote that "Al-Qaeda\*<sup>577</sup> is on our side in Syria," commenting on the news that the leader of the organization, Ayman al-Zawahiri, called Muslims support the Syrian opposition.<sup>578</sup>

Summing up the review of the Biden foreign policy team, it is worth noting that such close ties between team members and the president can have two consequences. On the one hand, these are people who had a history of working together, but who at the same time could have brought complementary perspectives to the Situation Room, with hands-on experience in global conflicts. On the other hand, the "clear virtue of intellectual harmony"<sup>579</sup> may well involve the risk of so-called groupthink.

## Chapter 1 Conclusions

Summing up the analysis of all the factors that influenced the formation of the foreign policy of the United States in relation to the Syrian conflict, we can say that decision to use the methodology of neoclassical realism in our study was justified. The influence of domestic political variables on the US policy in Syria was very significant and therefore requires closer consideration.

The systemic pressure for the United States at the beginning of the Syrian Civil War (2011) were by no means unambiguous. The distribution of power and the strategic environment seemed to favor Washington, American values and geopolitical interests pushed the White House to support the

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<sup>574</sup> Ibid.

<sup>575</sup> *Kaplan F. Biden's Team of Allies* // Slate. November 23, 2020. URL: <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2020/11/biden-blinken-sullivan-flournoy-haines.html> (accessed: 08.02.2023)

<sup>576</sup> *U.S. Grand Strategy in the Middle East* // Center for Strategic and International Studies. June 22, 2020. P. 12-13. URL: [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/event/201123\\_Alterman\\_Jake\\_Sullivan\\_Grand\\_Strategy\\_0.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/event/201123_Alterman_Jake_Sullivan_Grand_Strategy_0.pdf) (accessed: 08.02.2023)

<sup>577</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>578</sup> *Hillary Clinton Email Archive* // WikiLeaks. URL: <https://wikileaks.org/clinton-emails/emailid/23225#efmAGIAHu> (accessed: 08.02.2023)

<sup>579</sup> *Kaplan F. Biden's Team of Allies...*

protesters, international law could have again been interpreted as needed, and the technological superiority of the United States in general allowed intervention. However, the strategic uncertainty was great – the likelihood of Russian and Iranian intervention on the side of Damascus was much higher than in the case of Libya, and this factor could not but alert the American leadership.

In this situation, with Washington at a crossroads, various domestic political variables came into play. President Barack Obama fully shared one of the fundamental principles of the US strategic culture – the desire to resolve existing international conflicts by removing the “bad guys” from power in the enemy states and bringing the system of American-like values and government there. However, his tendency to overthink the situation, as well as being distracted by Egyptian and Libyan affairs, led to the fact that it was too late to react – the situation had changed, first of all, in relations between the state and society. An important role here was played by the intervention of the NATO in Libya, which split the American society. In addition, the technological advantage of the American army was partially leveled by the power of the Syrian air defense. In such circumstances, the American leadership could no longer carry out another major military operation similar to the Libyan one.

As a result, the United States decided to limit itself to material and diplomatic support for the rebels, and again in accordance with one of the key principles of its strategic culture – shifting “dirty work” to its Middle Eastern partners. Work was also actively carried out to demonize the Syrian regime and its allies, Russia and Iran. It should be noted that the influence of internal factors, according to the neoclassical realist theory, affected only tactical aspects: the US intervention in the Syrian conflict was systemically predetermined, and the intervening variables only specified that this intervention would be indirect.

In the situation with the transfer of the anti-ISIS\*<sup>580</sup> Operation Inherent Resolve to the territory of Syria, special attention should be paid to strategic uncertainty. All other variables and modifiers relatively favored the United States, but the uncertainty remained significant – Washington analysts had missed (intentionally or not – the question is still open) the rise of jihadism in Syria, and with it – the rapid growth of the Islamic State\*. In addition, uncertainty remained, the literal one – what if Syria would become another Afghanistan or Iraq for the United States?

And yet again intervening variables came into play. In order not to frustrate the public, and also in accordance with the norms of American strategic culture, the US intervention in the Syrian conflict was massive, but at the same time very limited – airstrikes, narrow special forces operations, plus material assistance to local allies, which were the Kurdish YPG, later united together with a number of Arab militias in the Syrian Democratic Forces.

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<sup>580</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

The situation changed significantly with the coming to power of the Republican administration of Donald Trump. The distribution of power and the strategic environment (especially in the regional context) gradually changed not in favor of Washington; strategic uncertainty only increased; in the field of military technologies in Syria, the US had a serious competitor in the face of Russia; and the illegality of the presence of the American military in Syria became more and more obvious every day. The American values were also under serious pressure due to the retreat of the United States from its positions, as well as due to the fall in support for these very values in the region. In addition, the geopolitical attention of the United States gradually shifted to the Asia-Pacific region, where China continued to gain strength.

These serious systemic incentives were supplemented by no less important domestic political factors. The personality of the newly elected president, his impulsiveness and desire for neo-isolationism left their mark on the entire US foreign policy. With regard to the problem under consideration, this resulted, on the one hand, in the desire to shift the Syrian problems to Russia and the Gulf monarchies and withdraw American troops from Syria, and on the other hand, in the first use of force against Assad's troops, which further confused the already complex Syrian puzzle. More than that, both the American society and the government and elites were seriously split, while of many of the president's decisions were practically sabotaged by the Washington bureaucracy.

At the same time, with all the tactical twists and turns, at the strategic level, US Syrian policy under Trump has not changed much. The fight against ISIS\*<sup>581</sup> was aimed mainly at pushing the terrorists out of Iraq into Syria, and then at occupying the oil-bearing regions of the country. By 2018-2019, when it became obvious that the Assad government had at least not lost the war, the White House set out to make life difficult for it and its allies, Russia and Iran, in an effort to split the so-called "Astana Troika". Washington rightly decided that time is on their side, and that the main forces can be thrown into confrontation with China.

After another change of the owner in the White House, when Democrat Joe Biden came to power, systemic variables changed even more in an unfavorable direction for the United States. Washington's global leadership was put into question for the first time in 30 years by rising powers around the world. In the Middle East, problems also arose one after another: the United States hastily left Afghanistan, completed its combat mission in Iraq, reduced its military presence in Saudi Arabia, and supported Israel in the next aggravation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict not that unconditionally than before. The result was a sharp cooling of relations with the countries of the region, which was once one of the main strongholds of the United States. All this together gave rise to an unprecedented scale of strategic uncertainty. At the same time, the Biden administration was trying to return to relying on American

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<sup>581</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

values, which meant, among other things, confronting the “rise of authoritarianism,” and the Middle East did not lose its geopolitical significance. In American society, Syria has finally ceased to arouse its former interest.

## Chapter 2. U.S. Syrian Policy During Barack Obama's Presidency (2011-2017)

### 2.1. First Reaction of the U.S. to the Syrian Events in Spring and Summer of 2011<sup>582</sup>

The events of the Arab Spring flared up exactly in the middle of the first presidential term of Barack Obama. He, as well as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton who enjoyed significant influence on the formation and implementation of the US foreign policy<sup>583</sup>, had to urgently adapt Middle East policy to rapidly changing conditions. However, even together, the president and the secretary of state by most estimates were unable to competently respond to the events in the Middle East in winter and spring of 2011<sup>584</sup>. Thus, the United States paid the most attention to the events that took place in Libya (not least at the behest of the European allies)<sup>585</sup>, and in Egypt, one of the key US allies in the region<sup>586</sup>.

It is important to note that even in relation to those Arab countries on which all the attention of the United States was focused, Washington's policy was extremely contradictory<sup>587</sup>. This was especially evident in the case of Egypt, when the White House was forced to constantly maneuver between various political forces struggling for power in Cairo, just to keep the country in its orbit of influence, and therefore constantly changed its position<sup>588</sup>.

Washington's first reaction to the events in Syria was also rather vague and consisted of “verbal condemnations followed by inaction.”<sup>589</sup> Back at the end of January 2011, Bashar al-Assad was free to give interviews to American media, where he convinced that Syria was stable<sup>590</sup>. It was not until mid-March that the State Department first appealed to Damascus to “refrain from violence against peaceful demonstrators.”<sup>591</sup> At the same time, a few days later, Hillary Clinton called Bashar al-Assad “a reformer” and “a different leader” thus separating him from his father Hafez al-Assad. As a result, the Secretary of State had to justify herself by saying that she was only quoting the opinions of various

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<sup>582</sup> The section is based on the following article: *Yurk A.* Barack Obama's diplomacy and Syrian peace process (In Russ.) // USA & Canada: Economics, Politics, Culture. 2023, No. 1. P. 77-94. DOI: 10.31857/S2686673023010042

<sup>583</sup> *Myers S.L.* Hillary Clinton's Last Tour as a Rock-Star Diplomat // The New York Times Magazine. June 27, 2012. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/01/magazine/hillary-clintons-last-tour-as-a-rock-star-diplomat.html> (accessed: 07.07.2022)

<sup>584</sup> See: *Springborg R.* The US Response to the Arab Uprising: Leadership Missing / *Alcaro R. & Haubrich-Seco M.* (eds.). Re-thinking Western Policies in Light of the Arab Uprising. 2012. P. 31-54. URL: [https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iairp\\_04.pdf](https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iairp_04.pdf) (accessed: 19.03.2023)

<sup>585</sup> *Davidson J.W.* France, Britain and the intervention... P. 310-329. DOI: 10.1080/09557571.2013.784573

<sup>586</sup> *Phillips C.* The Battle For Syria... P. 64. DOI: 10.12987/9780300262032

<sup>587</sup> *Sushentsov A.* Essays on US Policy... (In Russ.). P. 187-193.

<sup>588</sup> See: *Shumilin A.* US and Egypt: Searching for a New Partnership Model (In Russ.) // USA & Canada: Economics, Politics, Culture. 2013, № 1 (517). P. 37-54; *Burns W.* The Back Channel... (In Russ.). P. 415-433.

<sup>589</sup> *Litsas S.* US Foreign Policy... P. 142.

<sup>590</sup> Interview With Syrian President Bashar al-Assad // The Wall Street Journal. January 31, 2011. URL: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703833204576114712441122894> (accessed: 07.07.2022)

<sup>591</sup> Violence in Syria // U.S. Department of State. March 23, 2011. URL: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2011/03/158894.htm> (accessed: 07.07.2022)

congressmen who visited Syria, and did not express the administration's point of view.<sup>592</sup> All the more interesting is the opinion of Dennis Ross, in 2011 a Special Assistant to the President at the NSC and Senior Director for the Central Region, who indicates that Clinton was much more hawkish on Syria than Obama was.<sup>593</sup>

The “administration's point of view,” meanwhile, was lagging behind. Obama “was the least interested in the United States bogged down in another large-scale conflict,” and therefore, for the first few months, “together with Türkiye, he tried to find a way to resolve the crisis.”<sup>594</sup> As the president himself noted in his memoirs, due to the fact that Syria “had been an adversary of the United States for a long time,” Washington did not have “the economic, military and political leverage that we had in Egypt,”<sup>595</sup> which significantly complicated the ability to influence the evolution of the conflict at the initial stage. There is even a point of view according to which the Obama administration's response to the Syrian events was from and to a kind of “crisis management” aimed at “minimizing the risks that the crisis posed for President Obama's key foreign policy goals, as well as his domestic political capital and legacy.”<sup>596</sup>

However, time passed, and the uprising did not subside but on the contrary inflamed more and more, which literally required at least a public articulation of the US official position regarding Syrian events. As a result, Obama first spoke fully on Syria only in early April 2011. In his statement, he condemned “the abhorrent violence committed against peaceful protesters,” but so far only called on Assad “to listen to the voices of the Syrian people calling for meaningful political and economic reforms.”<sup>597</sup>

## 2.2. Obama Administrations and the Syrian Peace Process<sup>598</sup>

### 2.2.1. “The Struggle of Resolutions” in the UN Security Council in 2011-2012

With the growing intensity of the internal political struggle in Syria, both the rhetoric and the specific diplomatic actions of the US had been becoming tougher. In August 2011, Obama announced for the

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<sup>592</sup> Kessler G. Hillary Clinton's incredible statement on Syria // The Washington Post. April 4, 2011. URL: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/hillary-clintons-uncredible-statement-on-syria/2011/04/01/AFWPEYaC\\_blog.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/hillary-clintons-uncredible-statement-on-syria/2011/04/01/AFWPEYaC_blog.html) (accessed: 07.07.2022)

<sup>593</sup> Glasser S. Was Hillary Clinton a Good Secretary of State? // Politico. December 8, 2013. URL: <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2013/12/was-hillary-clinton-a-good-secretary-of-state-john-kerry-2016-100766/> (accessed: 12.07.2022)

<sup>594</sup> Bubnova N. Military-political course... P. 474.

<sup>595</sup> Obama B. Promised Land. New York: Crown, 2020. Ch. 25.

<sup>596</sup> Schulhofer-Wohl J. The Obama administration... P. 517–547. DOI: 10.1057/s42738-021-00085-y

<sup>597</sup> Statement from the President on the Violence in Syria // The White House. April 8, 2011. URL: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/04/08/statement-president-violence-syria> (accessed: 08.07.2022)

<sup>598</sup> The section is based on the following article: Yurk A. Barack Obama's diplomacy and Syrian peace process (In Russ.) // USA & Canada: Economics, Politics, Culture. 2023, No. 1. P. 77-94. DOI: 10.31857/S2686673023010042

first time that “for the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside,”<sup>599</sup> and in October the American ambassador was recalled from Damascus. At the same time the first attempt to pass an anti-Syrian resolution in the UN Security Council was made, designed to invoke Article 41 of Chapter VII of the UN Charter<sup>600</sup>, which could subsequently be used to intervene in the country according to the “Libyan scenario.”<sup>601</sup> It is also important to note that the United States did not act as a cosponsor of this resolution, which is just another indicator of Washington's reluctance to get seriously involved in Syrian affairs at that time.

At the end of 2011 the Arab League proposed the first concrete plan for a peace settlement in Syria. Washington seized on this idea, which should not come as a surprise since the Arab League at that time was dominated by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the closest US allies in the region<sup>602</sup>. In particular, the United States for the first time acted as a co-sponsor of a draft resolution of the UN Security Council in support of the Arab League peace project<sup>603</sup>. However, as Russian and Chinese representatives would later repeatedly point out, this and other similar draft pro-Western resolutions were designed to put pressure on only one side of the conflict – the Syrian government. Practically nothing was required from the opposition groups in return<sup>604</sup>. The connection of many oppositionists with Islamic extremists was also not reflected in the texts of the resolutions<sup>605</sup>. Moreover, despite the fact that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton tried to convince her Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov that the resolution was aimed solely at “forcing Assad into negotiations,”<sup>606</sup> it was hard to believe in it after the Libyan events.

It would be wrong to say that cooperation between the two sides on Syria at the UN was almost impossible. Thus, in April 2012, the great powers managed to agree on the adoption of a “six-point plan” by UN Special Representative for Syria Kofi Annan and on the creation, in accordance with UN Security

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<sup>599</sup> Statement by President Obama on the Situation in Syria // The White House. August 18, 2011. URL: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/08/18/statement-president-obama-situation-syria> (accessed: 08.07.2022)

<sup>600</sup> France, Germany, Portugal and United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland: draft resolution (S/2011/612). October 4, 2011. URL: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N11/531/31/PDF/N1153131.pdf> (accessed: 24.03.2023)

<sup>601</sup> *Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva M.* The work of the UN Security Council on the Syrian crisis in the context of the transformation of the system of international relations (In Russ.) // Bulletin of MGIMO-University. 2017, № 6 (57). P. 162-163. DOI: 10.24833/2071-8160-2017-6-57-161-173

<sup>602</sup> *Sapronova M.* The new role of the Arab League in regional and international relations (In Russ.) // New Oriental Review. March 17, 2013. URL: <https://ru.journal-neo.org/2013/03/17/novaya-rol-lag-v-regional-ny-h-i-mezhdunarodny-h-otnosheniyah/> (accessed: 08.07.2022)

<sup>603</sup> Bahrain, Colombia, Egypt, France, Germany, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Portugal, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Togo, Tunisia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and United States of America: draft resolution. February 4, 2012. URL: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N12/223/75/PDF/N1222375.pdf> (accessed: 24.03.2023)

<sup>604</sup> *Matveev I.* Syria in conflict... (In Russ.). P. 177.

<sup>605</sup> Security Council Fails to Adopt Draft Resolution on Syria as Russian Federation, China Veto Text Supporting Arab League's Proposed Peace Plan // United Nations. February 4, 2012. URL: <https://press.un.org/en/2012/sc10536.doc.htm> (accessed: 08.07.2022)

<sup>606</sup> *Clinton H.* Hard Choices... P. 693-695.

Council resolutions 2042<sup>607</sup> and 2043<sup>608</sup>, of the United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS), designed to “observe the cessation of armed violence in all its forms by all parties.”<sup>609</sup> However, already in July Western countries, including the United States, made an attempt to build on this success and pass a resolution de facto accusing the Syrian government of violating the ceasefire and threatening to take measures in accordance with Article 41.<sup>610</sup> Russia and China were forced to veto this project. As a result, the truce was broken, and UNSMIS stopped working in August 2012.

It is also important to note the information background created by Western and pro-Western media around the Syrian conflict. As Anton A. Kharlamov notes, “many reports about the bloodshed in Syria... were broadcast on the eve of or during meetings of the UNSC, the UNGA or meetings of the Human Rights Council,” which, as he suggested, was intended to “put pressure on the international community during the adoption of important political decisions on the Syrian problem.”<sup>611</sup> However, this method of creating the necessary emotional tension is quite typical of US foreign policy in recent years and decades.

### 2.2.2. Friends of Syria Group

Thus, the United States and its Western and Middle Eastern allies had to act around the Russian-Chinese veto in the UN Security Council. Blocking by Moscow and Beijing of the adoption of a resolution in support of the Arab League peace project in February 2012 prompted them to create an informal contact group on Syria.

The creation of such an association literally the next day after the veto of the above-mentioned resolution was announced by the then President of France, Nicolas Sarkozy. Despite this, according to Frederick Hof, Special Advisor for Transition in Syria to the Secretary of State, who personally participated in the events described, it was the US efforts that were key in its organization. He is echoed by researcher Aron Lund, who believes that the United States has taken on the bulk of the complex diplomatic work to attract countries that have become the core of the Friends of Syria Group.<sup>612</sup>

The first meeting of the “Friends” was held on February 24, 2012 in Tunisia. It was the country that initiated the Arab Spring, and at that time it seemed that it had really embarked on the path of democratic

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<sup>607</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 2042. April 14, 2012. URL: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N12/295/28/PDF/N1229528.pdf> (accessed: 24.03.2023)

<sup>608</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 2043. April 21, 2012. URL: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N12/305/91/PDF/N1230591.pdf> (accessed: 24.03.2023)

<sup>609</sup> United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS) (In Russ.) // United Nations. <https://www.un.org/ru/events/missions/past/unsmis/> (accessed: 12.07.2022)

<sup>610</sup> France, Germany, Portugal, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and United States of America: draft resolution (S/2012/538) // United Nations Security Council. July 19, 2012. URL: <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Syria%20S2012%20538.pdf> (accessed: 12.07.2022)

<sup>611</sup> Kharlamov A. “Arab spring” in Egypt... (In Russ.). P. 81-82.

<sup>612</sup> Lund A. Syria’s Fair-weather Friends // Foreign Affairs. October 31, 2017. URL: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-10-31/syrias-fair-weather-friends> (accessed: 13.07.2022)



transformation<sup>613</sup>. The results of the inaugural meeting of the association were rather moderate. Despite the fact that regional stakeholders, such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, insisted on the need for military intervention, the Western powers were wary of this idea due to the growing influence of Islamist elements in the ranks of the Syrian opposition, and therefore were more inclined towards a diplomatic solution to the conflict<sup>614</sup>.

The position of the United States regarding the activities and prospects of the Friends of Syria was expressed by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on the same day. In addition to generalizing about the growing isolation of the Assad government and increasing the flow of humanitarian aid, Clinton also made an important political statement, calling the Turkish-based Syrian National Council (SNC) “the leading legitimate representative of Syrians seeking peaceful democratic change” and “an effective representative of the Syrian people in governments and international organizations.”<sup>615</sup> Thus, another step was taken towards the actual refusal of Washington from the diplomatic recognition of the government in Damascus as the official representative of the Syrian people.

Subsequently, the Friends of Syria Group held three more meetings during 2012 – in Istanbul (April), Paris (July) and Marrakech (December). It is important to note that with each subsequent meeting, the position of both the group and the United States on Syria has become tougher. As a result of the Istanbul meeting, it was decided to create a working group on sanctions against Damascus, and in the final document adopted after the Paris summit, it was clearly stated that President Assad should give up power.

The most serious diplomatic step was taken at a conference in Morocco on December 12, 2012. The day before, President Barack Obama recognized the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (Syrian Opposition Coalition or SOC) created in November as “the legitimate representative of the Syrian people.”<sup>616</sup> Representatives of more than 100 countries signed this recognition in Marrakesh. This decision was rather strange, given that SOC was a collection of immigrant intellectuals who had no connections within Syria. The main reason for recognition was the pro-Western and democratic orientation of the majority of the members of SOC, which, however, on the contrary did not contribute to its popularity among the already predominantly Islamized Syrian opposition<sup>617</sup>.

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<sup>613</sup> See: *Vidyasova M.* Tunisia – the initiator of the “Arab revolutions” (In Russ.) // Actual Problems of Europe. 2012, №3. P. 42-91.

<sup>614</sup> *Lund A.* How Assad’s Enemies Gave Up on the Syrian Opposition // The Century Foundation. October 17, 2017. URL: <https://tcf.org/content/report/assads-enemies-gave-syrian-opposition/> (accessed: 13.07.2022)

<sup>615</sup> Press Availability on the Meeting of the Friends of the Syrian People // U.S. Department of State. February 24, 2012. URL: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2012/02/184635.htm> (accessed: 13.07.2022)

<sup>616</sup> Obama Recognizes Syrian Opposition Group // ABC News. December 12, 2012. URL: <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/OTUS/exclusive-president-obama-recognizes-syrian-opposition-group/story?id=17936599#.UMfDkawpCHA> (accessed: 13.07.2022)

<sup>617</sup> See: *Fedorchenko A.* Continuation of the “Arab Revolution”: Syrian Scenarios (In Russ.) // Asia and Africa Today. 2013, №8. P. 43; *Abylgaziev I., Krashennnikova V., Manoilo A. [and others.]*. US war for “peace”... (In Russ.). P. 17.

The assessment of this event can be approached from different positions. On the one hand, such recognition was a great diplomatic achievement for the Friends of Syria Group and, in particular, for the United States. On the other hand, such recognition seriously reduces the likelihood of a political settlement of the conflict, since the opposition group, recognized by influential external forces as a legitimate representative of its people, was practically deprived of incentives to negotiate with the government in Damascus. The same can be said about the opposite – the Syrian government saw no reason to enter into any negotiations with the opposition and the external players standing behind it, as it feels “pushed to the wall.”<sup>618</sup> In addition, the US methods of working with SOC were far from satisfactory: instead of motivating the members of the Coalition to negotiate with the government in Damascus, Washington concentrated their attention on “search for posts in the new government.”<sup>619</sup> One of the leading Syrian conflict researchers Maria S. Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva in her doctoral dissertation called this policy a “mistake.”<sup>620</sup> In our opinion, the term “honest mistake” would be more appropriate here. After the successful (in the American sense) coups in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, the American leadership had every reason to believe that Syria would definitely follow their example and, therefore, negotiations with Damascus do not make the slightest sense, since they only legitimize Bashar al-Assad and his allies.

### **2.2.3. Geneva Peace Process: From Geneva I to Geneva II**

Despite the unfavorable diplomatic background around the conflict, by the summer of 2012 the international community still managed to start a multilateral dialogue on Syria. The launching point for this dialogue was Geneva, where on June 30, 2012 the first international conference (now often referred to as Geneva I) was held to develop a plan for resolving the conflict. It was attended by the foreign ministers of the five permanent members of the UNSC, Türkiye, Iraq, Kuwait and Qatar, as well as representatives of the EU, the Arab League and UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon. Its resulted in the formation of an "action group" on Syria to continue joint consultations, as well as the adoption of the Geneva Communiqué – a plan for international support for the efforts of the Syrians to overcome the crisis.<sup>621</sup>

An important difference between the Geneva Communiqué and the Western version of the resolution of the Syrian conflict was the possibility of forming a future transitional government not only from opposition activists, but also from members of the current government in Damascus. However, as evidenced by a direct participant in the negotiations on Syria in Geneva, Maria S. Khodynskaya-

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<sup>618</sup> *Talmon S.* Recognition of Opposition Groups as the Legitimate Representative of a People // *Chinese Journal of International Law*. 2012, Vol. 12, Issue 2. P. 251. DOI: 10.1093/chinesejil/jmt014

<sup>619</sup> *Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva M.* The Syrian Crisis in the Transforming... P. 108.

<sup>620</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>621</sup> Results of the Geneva I international conference on Syria. Dossier (In Russ.) // TASS. October 14, 2013. URL: <http://tass.ru/politika/690267> (accessed: 14.07.2022)

Golenishcheva, Washington considered both the negotiations themselves and the Geneva Communiqué as another tool to remove the Assad government. American diplomats were extremely selective in quoting the Geneva I final document, freely interpreting it in support of the US position<sup>622</sup>.

For example, on the same day that the Geneva Communiqué was adopted, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton gave an interview to US National Public Radio. In it, she stated that “people with blood on their hands” will not be allowed into the new Syrian government<sup>623</sup>. Indisputable in its essence, the statement, in the context of the general American discourse on Syria, tacitly supplemented the Geneva Communiqué with the missing, according to Washington, clause on the need to remove the Syrian leader from power.

In early 2013, President Assad himself came up with his peace plan. Formally, it was no different from the plan proposed six months ago in Geneva, with one important exception – it involved the cessation of foreign support for terrorist groups<sup>624</sup>. Obviously, this demand was an open jab at the United States for its support of the Syrian “moderate opposition”. In response to the move, US State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland called Assad's plan “another attempt by the regime to cling to power” and “detached from reality.”<sup>625</sup>

Thus, despite the apparent success, the adoption of the Geneva Communiqué did not lead to the automatic start of its implementation. The transitional Syrian government was not created due to the aggravation of the armed confrontation and the actual failure of the peaceful “six-point plan”. As a result, UN Special Representative for Syria Kofi Annan resigned and was replaced by Lakhdar Brahimi, who on January 30, 2013 proposed to revise the Geneva Communiqué, as its terms were unfeasible in the current environment.

A new conference on Syria began to be prepared almost immediately after the arrival of Brahimi in August 2012, with the active participation of the United States and Russia. However, this process dragged on for almost a year and a half, for which there were several reasons. First, these are the contradictory positions of the permanent members of the UNSC, mainly Moscow and Washington. While the first, although for the most part taking the side of Damascus, tried to engage in dialogue with the moderate opposition, the second persistently repeated the “Assad must go” mantra<sup>626</sup>. All this clearly did not contribute to the peacekeeping mission of the conference.

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<sup>622</sup> *Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva M.* Formation of the Geneva negotiation process to resolve the conflict in Syria (Geneva I) (In Russ.) // Bulletin of Bryansk State University. 2017, № 4 (34). P. 153.

<sup>623</sup> Interview With Michele Kelemen of NPR // U.S. Department of State. June 30, 2012. URL: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2012/06/194335.htm> (accessed: 14.07.2022)

<sup>624</sup> Bashar al-Assad proposes to resolve the Syrian crisis through new elections (In Russ.) // TASS. January 6, 2013. URL: <http://tass.ru/glavnie-novosti/656039> (accessed: 14.07.2022)

<sup>625</sup> Assad's Speech // U.S. Department of State. January 6, 2013. URL: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/01/202504.htm> (accessed: 14.07.2022)

<sup>626</sup> See: *Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva M.* Preparation of Geneva II in the light of topical aspects of the development of the Syrian crisis (In Russ.) // Bulletin of MGIMO-University. 2013, № 5 (32). P. 33-38. DOI: 10.24833/2071-8160-2013-5-32-33-38

The second factor that seriously influenced the delay in the convening of Geneva II was the incident with a chemical attack in Ghouta, which took place in August 2013 and for some time sharply increased the chances of a United States military intervention in the Syrian conflict. Thus, due to the alleged chemical attack by the American side, the “pre-Geneva” preparatory meeting with the Russian delegation in The Hague was postponed. In response to this, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia Gennady M. Gatilov expressed regret, noting that “Working out the political parameters for a resolution in Syria would be exceptionally useful now, when the threat of [military] force hangs over this country.”<sup>627</sup> On the other hand, it is possible that it was precisely the impossibility of resolving the conflict in Syria according to the Libyan scenario, revealed during the solving of the problem with chemical weapons, that prompted the United States to use diplomatic tools more widely and actively, including the Geneva talks.

Finally, the third factor, closely related to the first one, was the split in the ranks of the Syrian opposition. The split of the opposition movement into more or less moderate and secular forces and the religious extremists has seriously complicated the process of determining who could be considered an acceptable candidate to represent the interests of the Syrian people in Geneva and who was not. In addition, many actors in the Syrian conflict were not invited to the conference at all: for example, the Syrian Kurds or Iran, whose invitation was withdrawn by the UN at the insistence of the United States and the pro-Western Syrian opposition<sup>628</sup>.

After all, Geneva II only started in Montreux on January 22, 2014, thanks to some détente in relations between Russia and the United States, “which have become more pragmatic since the rise of the Islamic State”<sup>629</sup>.<sup>630</sup> The United States was represented at the conference by the new Secretary of State, John Kerry. In his statement, however, he lashed out at the Assad government, accusing the Syrian president of unleashing a conflict against “peaceful demonstrators” and brutal fighting methods. Basing on this, the head of American diplomacy concluded that “Bashar Assad will not be part of that transition government,” since “no way possible in the imagination” how “the man who has led the brutal response to his own people could regain the legitimacy to govern.”<sup>631</sup>

Mr. Kerry's Syrian colleague Walid Muallem could not but react to this, noting that some of the states participating in the negotiations had “Syrian blood on their hands,” clearly alluding to the United States as well, and also stated that “nobody in this world has the right to withdraw the legitimacy of a president,

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<sup>627</sup> Russia regrets U.S. postponement of Hague meeting on Syria // Reuters. August 27, 2013. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-russia-idUSBRE97Q06E20130827> (accessed: 15.07.2022)

<sup>628</sup> The U.N. invitation that nearly undid Syria peace talks // Reuters. January 22, 2014. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/syria-crisis-un-peace-talks-idINDEEA0L02920140122> (accessed: 17.07.2023)

<sup>629</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>630</sup> *Lundgren M.* Mediation in Syria: initiatives, strategies, and obstacles, 2011–2016 // *Contemporary Security Policy*. 2016, Vol. 37, No. 2. P. 277. DOI: 10.1080/13523260.2016.1192377

<sup>631</sup> Intervention at the Geneva II International Conference on Syria // U.S. Department of State. January 22, 2014. URL: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/01/220504.htm> (accessed: 15.07.2022)

or government... other than the Syrians themselves.”<sup>632</sup> In addition, a bit later the head of the Syrian Foreign Ministry refused to conduct any negotiations with the United States until the Secretary of State apologized for his words about President Assad<sup>633</sup>.

In such circumstances, it is not surprising that the second conference hardly had more positive consequences than the first one. As was noted by a researcher at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences Boris V. Dolgov, “the only result [of Geneva II] can probably be considered the very fact of holding an international conference that brought together more than 30 participants, including the heads of the Russian Foreign Ministry and the US State Department, who confirmed that the solution to the Syrian crisis can only be political.”<sup>634</sup> The government and opposition delegations failed to reach a compromise on any significant issue. The parties were only able to agree on the supply of humanitarian aid to the besieged city of Homs and the evacuation of civilians from there, but this was clearly an insufficient result for an event of this level.

Not the last role in the failure of the conference was played by the positions taken by external actors, including the United States. Despite the fact that both Syrian parties were clearly playing for time and putting forward conditions that were obviously unacceptable to each other, leading the negotiations to a dead end, Washington continued to interpret the course of the negotiations one-sidedly. E.g., following the results of the second round of negotiations, which ended on February 14, 2014, Secretary Kerry accused solely the Syrian government of disrupting Geneva II, while the opposition in his opinion “demonstrated a courageous and mature seriousness of purpose and willingness to discuss all aspects of the conflict.”<sup>635</sup>

#### **2.2.4. Continuation of the Geneva Process and Fight Against ISIS\*<sup>636</sup>: a Time of Missed Opportunities?**

Soon after the actual failure of Geneva II, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon came up with the idea of convening a third international conference on Syria. However, in the spring of 2014, the international community had to gradually begin to be distracted from the intra-Syrian confrontation. The attention of most countries, and not least the United States, switched to the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL or ISIS)\* at that time globally perceived as an existential threat.<sup>637</sup>

<sup>632</sup> Geneva II conference shadowed by clashes // China Daily. January 23, 2014. URL: [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2014-01/23/content\\_17253481.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2014-01/23/content_17253481.htm) (accessed: 14.07.2023)

<sup>633</sup> Damascus won't negotiate directly with US until Kerry apologizes (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. February 1, 2014. URL: <https://ria.ru/world/20140201/992569453.html> (accessed: 15.07.2022)

<sup>634</sup> *Dolgov B.* Geneva II: Results of the Conference (In Russ.) // New Oriental Review. February 5, 2014. URL: <https://ru.journal-neo.org/2014/02/05/zhenewa-ii-itogi-konferentsii/> (accessed: 15.07.2022)

<sup>635</sup> Geneva Conference and Situation in Syria // U.S. Department of States. February 16, 2014. URL: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/02/221702.htm> (accessed: 15.07.2022)

<sup>636</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>637</sup> *Mueller J., Stewart M.G.* Misoverestimating ISIS\*: Comparisons with Al-Qaeda\* // Perspectives on Terrorism. 2016, Vol. 10, No. 4. P. 30-39.

The pro-Western opposition groups in Syria were also supposed to switch to the fight against ISIS\*<sup>638</sup>. Such a maneuver in the context of the Syrian peace settlement, which has been postponed “until better days”, was seen in Washington as a way to strengthen their positions “on the ground” and in the future reformation of the country. The Obama administration's focus on this approach can be clearly seen in the presidential statement of September 10, 2014. In it, Obama was quite critical of Assad regime, saying that he “terrorizes its own people” and “will never regain the legitimacy it has lost,” so that in this struggle the US “cannot rely” on it. At the same time, he noted that the US “must strengthen the opposition as the best counterweight to extremists like ISIL\* , while pursuing the political solution necessary to solve Syria’s crisis once and for all.”<sup>639</sup>

In addition, Washington was going to fight ISIS\* primarily in Iraq, not in Syria. Inside the administration Obama's strategy was called “Iraq-first”<sup>640</sup>, which speaks quite clearly about the then priorities of the Washington. It was in the US interest that ISIS\* and the Assad government wear down fighting each other for as long as possible, while the pro-Western Syrian factions would receive American assistance and eventually prevail in this internecine struggle. Iraq, on the other hand, had to be saved in the first place, since it gradually fell under Iranian influence, and the United States needed to take the fight against Islamic extremists in this country into its own hands. Thus, under these conditions, the Syrian peace process took a backseat in Obama’s mind.

However, the situation changed dramatically when, on September 30, 2015, Russia launched its own military operation in Syria, thereby regaining its position as a key player in the Syrian conflict. This resulted in the Vienna talks on Syria, which began on October 23, 2015 with a preliminary meeting of foreign ministers of the United States, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Türkiye. Then, until October 30, more than a dozen countries joined them – Iraq, Iran, Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Lebanon, Oman, Great Britain, France, China, Germany and Italy, as well as representatives of the UN, EU and the Arab League. Together they formed the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), co-chaired by Russia and the United States.

The Vienna talks, in the context of a change in the American position on the Syrian conflict, became a breakthrough in two dimensions. First, the United States gave the go-ahead to bring Iran into the talks on Syria. In many ways, this was due to the recent conclusion of the Iranian nuclear deal, after the success of which the United States decided to probe the possibility of further expanding cooperation with the Islamic Republic. In addition, Washington has finally begun to realize that the only hope for

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<sup>638</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>639</sup> Statement by the President on ISIL\* // The White House. September 10, 2014. URL: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/statement-president-isil-1> (accessed: 16.07.2022)

<sup>640</sup> *Samuilov S., Panyuzheva M.* US fight against ISIS\*... P. 7.

removing President Assad from power is to find a political solution to the conflict, together with the two sponsors of the Syrian president, Moscow and Tehran<sup>641</sup>.

Secondly, with regard to Assad, John Kerry somewhat softened his rhetoric regarding the Syrian leader, saying that now the main thing is to “get into a political process”, during which the future of Syria will be decided<sup>642</sup>. Thus, the US has publicly dropped its demand for Assad's immediate departure, while maintaining its position that “there is no way that President Assad can unite and govern Syria.”<sup>643</sup>

The outcome of two rounds of negotiations was a new peace plan, presented on November 14. In it, the parties expressed support for a political solution to the Syrian crisis, their commitment to defeating ISIS\*<sup>644</sup> and other terrorist groups, and also decided to re-start intra-Syrian negotiations in Geneva on January 1, 2016<sup>645</sup>. This decision was then in general terms legally enshrined in UNSCR 2254 of December 18 2015, still serving as the cornerstone for the Syrian peace process<sup>646</sup>.

At the same time, a few days before the start of the final round of the Vienna talks, the United States came up with a unilateral proposal to create three working groups – on coordinating the opposition to the SAR, on countering terrorism and on humanitarian issues. This caused bewilderment and dissatisfaction on the Russian side, because, firstly, no one informed Russia about this, and secondly, the format proposed by the Americans actually replaced the “Four Committees Initiative”, put forward back in July 2015 by a new special envoy United Nations on Syria by Staffan de Mistura<sup>647</sup>.

### **2.2.5. From Conflict Resolution to Ceasefire: Geneva III and U.S.-Russian Agreements in 2016**

The new inter-Syrian Geneva III conference planned in Vienna began with a slight delay, on February 1, 2016. Once again, the negotiations failed. Many disagreements that the parties could not resolve arose even at the preparation stage, mainly regarding the composition of the participants in the negotiations. In addition, the chief negotiator for the Syrian opposition, Mohammed Alloush, said that US Secretary of State John Kerry pressured him to bring his delegation to the negotiating table with the delegation of the Assad government<sup>648</sup>. John Kerry himself accused the Assad government of continuing the bombing

<sup>641</sup> *Erdbrink T., Chan S., Sanger D.* After a U.S. Shift, Iran Has a Seat at Talks on War in Syria // The New York Times. October 28, 2015. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/29/world/middleeast/syria-talks-vienna-iran.html> (accessed: 16.07.2022)

<sup>642</sup> Remarks to the Press in Vienna, Austria // U.S. Department of States. October 23, 2015. URL: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2015/10/248677.htm> (accessed: 16.07.2022)

<sup>643</sup> Joint Press Availability with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura // U.S. Department of State. October 30, 2015. URL: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2015/10/249019.htm> (accessed: 16.07.2022)

<sup>644</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>645</sup> Press Availability with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura // U.S. Department of State. November 14, 2015. URL: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2015/11/249515.htm> (accessed: 16.07.2022)

<sup>646</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254. December 18, 2015. URL: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N15/443/34/PDF/N1544334.pdf> (accessed: 24.03.2023)

<sup>647</sup> Second round of Syria talks to be held in Vienna (In Russ.) // TASS. November 14, 2015. URL: <http://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/2434788> (accessed: 16.07.2022)

<sup>648</sup> Syrian opposition says Kerry applies pressure over peace talks // Reuters. January 24, 2016. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-opposition-idUKKCN0V20TW> (accessed: 16.07.2022)

of civilians<sup>649</sup>. As a result, already on February 3, under the pretext of launching an offensive operation of the government army north of Aleppo, the negotiations were suspended.

The failure of the Geneva III first steps seemed to pave the way for a much more narrow, bilateral agreements between Moscow and Washington. On February 22, the heads of the foreign ministries of the United States and Russia issued a joint statement in which they announced the introduction of a ceasefire regime from February 27<sup>650</sup>. Despite the fact that two days later, Secretary Kerry laid the blame for a possible breakdown of the truce on Iran and Russia in advance and said that the Plan B adopted in this case would be “more confrontational”<sup>651</sup>, on February 26, the UNSC unanimously adopted Resolution 2268, which demanded that all parties to the conflict comply with the terms of the US-Russian agreement<sup>652</sup>.

Inter-Syrian negotiations in Geneva, meanwhile, were continued. However, the only achievement within the framework of Geneva III was the publication by Staffan de Mistura on March 24 of 12 points that were not rejected by the parties to the conflict. It is noteworthy that the document did not say anything about the fate of the Syrian president. The head of the US State Department was in Moscow at the time; there, he stated that the United States, together with Russia, would step up efforts to maintain the ceasefire<sup>653</sup>.

On July 26, against the background of the events in the besieged Aleppo, another meeting was held in Geneva, this time in the US-Russia-UN format. The parties began preparations for the next round of inter-Syrian negotiations, which, however, again came down to the achievement on September 10, 2016 of US-Russian agreements on the cessation of hostilities. Secretary of State John Kerry was quite clear about their significance when he called them “a possible turning point.”<sup>654</sup> The main points of the agreement really looked encouraging – the zones of activity of the Syrian “moderate opposition” and extremists were to be divided, and interaction between US and Russian aviation was established. However, the ceasefire did not last long. Already on September 17, American aircraft attacked the positions of Syrian government troops in Deir-ez-Zor province inflicting heavy losses. As a result, Moscow and Damascus withdrew from the agreement.

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<sup>649</sup> Video Statement on Syria Negotiations // U.S. Department of State. January 31, 2016. URL: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2016/01/251899.htm> (accessed: 16.07.2022)

<sup>650</sup> Joint Statement of the United States and the Russian Federation, as Co-Chairs of the ISSG, on Cessation of Hostilities in Syria // U.S. Department of State. February 22, 2016. URL: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/02/253115.htm> (accessed: 16.07.2022)

<sup>651</sup> Kerry: Plan B may be more confrontational than ceasefire deal (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. February 24, 2016. URL: [https://ria.ru/syria\\_peace/20160224/1380018639.html](https://ria.ru/syria_peace/20160224/1380018639.html) (accessed: 17.07.2022)

<sup>652</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 2268 // United Nations Security Council. February 26, 2016. URL: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N16/053/63/PDF/N1605363.pdf> (accessed: 17.07.2022)

<sup>653</sup> UN develops 12 points for political reform in Syria (In Russ.) // Rossiyskaya gazeta. March 24, 2016. URL: <https://rg.ru/2016/03/24/oon-razrabotala-12-punktov-politicheskoy-reformy-v-sirii.html> (accessed: 17.07.2022)

<sup>654</sup> Remarks With Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura at a Press Availability // U.S. Department of State. September 9, 2016. URL: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2016/09/261722.htm> (accessed: 17.07.2022)



In mid-October 2016, the last US attempt during the presidency of Barack Obama to establish a negotiation process on Syria took place in Lausanne. The meeting was attended by representatives of the United States, Russia, as well as a number of regional powers. Despite statements by Secretary of State Kerry that several new ideas were expressed during the brainstorming<sup>655</sup>, nothing fundamentally new was developed at the talks – no joint statement was even made at the end of the meeting, and some foreign ministers refused to comment at all. Apparently, the recent American strike on Deir-ez-Zor still maintained serious diplomatic tensions between the US and Russia.

Further peace talks to establish a ceasefire in Syria during Obama's presidency took place without the participation of the United States. This was most clearly reflected at the end of December 2016, when Russia, Türkiye and Iran, perceiving the US policy in Syria as a threat to their national interests<sup>656</sup>, jointly established a new ceasefire regime in Syria, thereby initiating the Astana process. Officially Washington reacted with restraint to the adoption of UNSCR 2336, which fixes the tripartite agreements, calling it “reflecting the right balance.”<sup>657</sup>

The American media reacted completely differently to the very fact of negotiations without the participation of the United States, but between “three authoritarian regimes”, which unexpectedly felt “empowered enough to assume their role in an area where perhaps the biggest threat to the West, the Islamic State\*, operates.”<sup>658</sup> When Resolution 2336 was adopted by the UNSC and even supported by the United States, the media produced another wave of indignation and doubts followed in that Russia, Türkiye and Iran alone, without the Western help, would be able to establish peace<sup>659</sup>. American researchers later called the achievements of the Astana process the establishment of an “illiberal peace.”<sup>660</sup>

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<sup>655</sup> Morello C. Syria talks in Switzerland produce only a decision to keep talking // The Washington Post. October 15, 2016. URL: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/kerry-in-switzerland-for-talks-about-syria/2016/10/15/112a5c2c-909b-11e6-bc00-1a9756d4111b\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/kerry-in-switzerland-for-talks-about-syria/2016/10/15/112a5c2c-909b-11e6-bc00-1a9756d4111b_story.html) (accessed: 17.07.2022)

<sup>656</sup> Namli K., Farasin F. ASTANA: The Rise of a New Alliance and Its Implications for International Relations / *Khatib D.K. (ed.) The Syrian Crisis: Effects on the Regional and International Relations*. Springer, 2020. P. 131-134. DOI: 10.1007/978-981-15-5050-8

<sup>657</sup> US considers UN Security Council resolution on Syria balanced (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. December 31, 2016. URL: <https://ria.ru/syria/20161231/1485046490.html> (accessed: 17.07.2022)

<sup>658</sup> Bershidsky L. The U.S. Is Now a Country That Can Be Ignored // Bloomberg. December 22, 2016. URL: <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2016-12-21/the-u-s-is-now-a-country-that-can-be-ignored> (accessed: 17.07.2022)

<sup>659</sup> Can Russia Make Peace as Well as War? // The New York Times. December 31, 2016. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/31/opinion/can-russia-make-peace-as-well-as-war.html> (accessed: 17.07.2022)

<sup>660</sup> Abboud S. Making peace to sustain war: the Astana Process and Syria's illiberal peace // *Peacebuilding*. 2021, Vol. 9, No. 3. P. 326-343. DOI: 10.1080/21647259.2021.18956

### 2.3. Settlement of the Syrian Chemical Weapons Crisis

The already mentioned sharp aggravation of the Syrian conflict due to the alleged chemical attack in Ghouta in August 2013 and the further settlement of this situation are of such great importance that their consideration deserves a separate paragraph. It is also important that this case is unusually reminiscent of the situation in the spring of 2011 that developed around Libya. Then, on similar grounds, a “humanitarian intervention” by NATO countries and their allies led by the United States was carried out in this MENA country. Given these circumstances, the best way to look at the Syrian chemical weapons crisis and the role of the United States in it, in our opinion, is to compare the two cases mentioned above.

First of all, consider the situation in Libya and Syria before the events of the Arab Spring. Libya, thanks to its richest oil resources, was one of the most prosperous states in Africa, but only Tripoli could be considered a truly developed region of Libya while the rest of the country was a province that was not very prosperous to varying degrees. The permanent leader of the Libyan Jamahiriya was Muammar Gaddafi, who was the clearest example of charismatic leadership and had more or less strong relations with Western countries, although for some time (1992-2004) Libya was forced to spend under UN sanctions associated with a series of terrorist attacks<sup>661</sup>.

Syria presented a much sadder picture – the country has been ruled by the authoritarian Baath Party for more than 30 years, and the ruling elites mostly belonged to the Shiite religious movement of the Alawites, who make up only about 11% of the country's population, while the vast majority of Syrians (74%) were Sunnis.<sup>662</sup> The state was under severe sanctions, this time exclusively from Western countries, oil reserves were running out, and the industry was in decline. President Bashar al-Assad was much softer and more liberal than his father and predecessor Hafez, but he was in no hurry to carry out democratic reforms, fearing the reaction of the Alawite elites.

In this state, the two countries we are considering approached the spring of 2011. There is no direct evidence that the United States was behind the events of the Arab Spring, but they were quick to take advantage of the situation anyway. The officially declared causes of American concern were, of course, “human rights” and “humanitarian situation,” but Washington pursued different real interests in different countries. In the case of Libya, various experts named such goals as trying to prevent Libya from creating an African Investment Bank<sup>663</sup>, reducing the influence of China (which was extremely interested in the

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<sup>661</sup> Developments in North Africa and the Middle East: Causes and Effects (In Russ.) // World Economy and International Relations. 2011, №8. P. 65.

<sup>662</sup> *Beckouche P. (ed.)*. Europe's Mediterranean Neighbourhood // Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing. 2017. P. 178.

<sup>663</sup> *Tsyganok A.* US and NATO intervention... (In Russ.). P. 105.

supply of Libyan oil)<sup>664</sup> and Russia in the Mediterranean<sup>665</sup>, as well as establishing control over the richest Libyan oil fields<sup>666</sup>.

We have already discussed in detail the strategic interests of the United States in relation to Syria above. If we are to speak about the reasons for such a US policy common to both countries, then we can recall the well-known American plan for building a Greater Middle East along with its “democratization” and “reconstruction.”<sup>667</sup> Thus, the reasons for the interest of the United States in the Libyan and Syrian conflicts are the same and very prosaic – preventing the emergence of new and strengthening old hostile centers of power, as well as establishing control over the key resources.

Let us move on to comparing the initial phases of conflicts in the countries under consideration. Mass protests in Libya began in mid-February 2011. The distinctive features of the Libyan events were the massive transfer of army units to the rebel side, and most importantly – the clear regional division of the country: the East, with its center in Benghazi, was the stronghold of the rebels, and the West, with Tripoli, stayed with the government forces.

The protests in Syria began a month later, in March, and were somewhat different from those in Libya. So, although mass desertion from the government Syrian Arab Army was recorded, it did not take on such an endemic character as in Libya, which somewhat slowed down the course of events. Another circumstance that also slowed it down was that in Syria, the same clear regional division of the country into two warring camps did not happen, and sometimes demonstrations for and against Assad took place in the same cities almost simultaneously<sup>668</sup>.

What can be found in common in these two conflicts? Firstly, it should be noted the significant role of the Islamists in their escalation: the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group in Libya and the many Islamist groups in Syria are clear evidence of this. Secondly, there is a rather high level of support for their authoritarian leaders in both countries: mass demonstrations in support of Gaddafi and Assad at that time were not something surprising. And thirdly, the role and interest of the United States in unleashing these conflicts. Again, there is no 100% proof that Washington was behind the events of the Arab Spring. The generally accepted point of view, especially in the West, is that the United States only supported the democratic impulse of the Arab people, but sometimes certain materials appear that indicate the direct involvement of the United States in the preparation and implementation of the Arab Spring. Thus, the material of Barry Rubin, a leading analyst at the Center for the Study of International Affairs, indicated

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<sup>664</sup> *Batyuk V.* Conflicts of low intensity... (In Russ.). P. 104.

<sup>665</sup> Developments in North Africa and the Middle East: International Factors (In Russ.) // *World Economy and International Relations*. 2012, №6. P. 103.

<sup>666</sup> *Chossudovsky M.* «Operation Libya» and the Battle for Oil // NSPM. March 17, 2011. URL: <http://www.nspm.rs/nspm-in-english/operation-libya-and-the-battle-for-oil.html> (accessed: 20.01.2023)

<sup>667</sup> Developments in North Africa and the Middle East: International Factors... (In Russ.). P. 107.

<sup>668</sup> See: *Dolgov B.* The phenomenon of the “Arab Spring” ... (In Russ.). P. 115; *Cole B.* The Syrian Information... P. 340-343.

that back in August 2010, a plan was prepared for President Obama to eliminate authoritarian leaders in the countries of the Middle East with the assistance of religious opposition<sup>669</sup>.

So, the United States was in any case interested in intervening in both conflicts in question. The preparatory measures for both cases were similar: first there were official statements by the American leadership about the inadmissibility of violence and the observance of human rights by government forces<sup>670</sup>, followed by numerous videos on YouTube (in Syria, organizations such as the US and UK-funded White Helmets were responsible for this aspect), TV reports and articles about just the same numerous violations of them (either imaginary or real, but many times exaggerated)<sup>671</sup>. Then some out of the ordinary event inevitably followed, which was supposed to become a trigger, a pretext for intervention. This has been the case since the interventions in the Bosnian War in 1995 after the events in Srebrenica, with the Kosovo War after the incident in Racak in 1998, with the war in Afghanistan after 9/11. In the case of Libya, “the world’s tolerance was breached” by the events in Misurata<sup>672</sup>. In the Syrian version, the “trigger” was supposed to be a chemical attack in Ghouta on August 21, 2013. However, the problem of Syrian chemical weapons should be considered in more detail.

The American leadership as a whole was extremely concerned about the likelihood of the use and safety of Syrian chemical weapons. On August 20, 2012, President Barack Obama said that the use of CW by government forces in Syria would become a “red line,” which meant that in this case Washington could reconsider its plans to intervene in the Syrian conflict<sup>673</sup>. It is interesting to note that soon after this announcement, the first reports of the use of chemical weapons in Syria began to show up. France announced two alleged chemical attacks in October 2012 near Salkin in the province of Idlib and in December in Homs, but then the UN mission recognized the information about these and several later chemical attacks as false<sup>674</sup>.

It will be all the more interesting to see that, for example, the December case received some publicity in the American media. So, on December 18 (five days before the expected date of the incident), the

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<sup>669</sup> *Rubin B.* The Secret Document That Set Obama’s Middle East Policy // PJ Media. March 14, 2013. URL: <https://pjmedia.com/barryrubin/2013/03/14/the-secret-document-that-set-obamas-middle-east-policy-n133642> (accessed: 20.01.2023)

<sup>670</sup> Syrian Regime Attacks Against Civilians // U.S. Department of State. December 24, 2012. URL: <http://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/12/202380.htm> (accessed: 20.01.2023); Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney // The White House. January 9, 2013. URL: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/01/09/press-briefing-press-secretary-jay-carney-192013> (accessed: 20.01.2023)

<sup>671</sup> *Barnard A.* New Report on Syrian Missiles Shows Extent of Death and Damage // The New York Times. February 26, 2013. URL: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/27/world/middleeast/new-report-details-syrian-missile-attack.html> (accessed: 20.01.2023); *Rick Gladstone and Alan Cowell.* Military in Syria Is Accused of Massacre // The New York Times. April 11, 2013. URL: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/12/world/middleeast/syria.html> (accessed: 20.01.2023)

<sup>672</sup> *Harvey F., Mitton J.* Fighting for Credibility... P. 171-172.

<sup>673</sup> Remarks by the President to the White House Press Corps // The White House. August 20, 2012. URL: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/08/20/remarks-president-white-house-press-corps> (accessed: 20.01.2023)

<sup>674</sup> Gas and kill: who is really to blame for the chemical attacks in Syria (In Russ.) // Lenta.ru. April 13, 2018. URL: [https://lenta.ru/articles/2018/04/13/han\\_sheptun/](https://lenta.ru/articles/2018/04/13/han_sheptun/) (accessed: 20.01.2023)

article by David Ignatius, the one considered “the CIA’s spokesman at The Washington Post,”<sup>675</sup> published an article which tells about a Syrian defector who reports that from a secret base of Syrian troops in Nasiriyah, northeast of Damascus, 100 kg of materials for the manufacture of chemical weapons were taken out. He reports that they were taken to Lebanon, which probably should have served as indirect confirmation that these materials were used to carry out a chemical attack in Homs, located near the Lebanese border. In addition, this conversation was allegedly organized by the Syrian Support Group, a team of Syrian exiles based in Washington, which also does not add impartiality and credibility to this source.<sup>676</sup> A few weeks after the alleged Homs incident, an article by Josh Rogin in Foreign Policy reported on an investigation by US diplomats in Türkiye that allegedly revealed that the SAA “likely used chemical weapons against its own people” in December.<sup>677</sup>

The first case of the use of chemical weapons in Syria certified by the UN occurred on March 19, 2013 in Khan al-Asal in the Aleppo province. Early in the morning, a certain object filled with gas collapsed at the location of the Syrian troops, as a result of which 25 people died (including 16 SAA soldiers) and more than 100 were injured.<sup>678</sup> The Syrian government and the rebels were quick to blame each other for what had happened, but all official investigations could find out was that it was indeed a chemical attack.

On April 25, Miguel Rodriguez, Director of the Legislative Affairs Office at the White House Office, sent letters to Senators John McCain and Carl Levin, stating that the intelligence community estimated that “the Assad regime, rather than opposition forces, would be behind any use of chemical weapons.”<sup>679</sup> On the same day, this topic was raised at a briefing at the White House, where it was stated that all these estimates are only estimates based on a “mosaic of information” that is subject to “further investigation.”<sup>680</sup>

In mid-June, Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes issued a statement on the results of this investigation, which, however, did not change anything. It still claimed that “the intelligence community believes” that the Assad regime was behind the chemical attacks, but “the level of confidence has

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<sup>675</sup> *Byers D.* Ignatius is national security go-to guy // Politico. March 19, 2012. URL:

<https://www.politico.com/story/2012/03/ignatius-is-national-security-go-to-guy-074164> (accessed: 20.01.2023)

<sup>676</sup> *Ignatius D.* A defector’s account of Syrian chemical weapons on the move // The Washington Post. December 18, 2012.

URL: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/a-defectors-account-of-syrian-chemical-weapons-on-the-move/2012/12/18/d5130d86-492e-11e2-ad54-580638ede391\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/a-defectors-account-of-syrian-chemical-weapons-on-the-move/2012/12/18/d5130d86-492e-11e2-ad54-580638ede391_story.html) (accessed: 20.01.2023)

<sup>677</sup> *Rogin J.* Exclusive: Secret State Department cable: Chemical weapons used in Syria // Foreign Policy. January 15, 2013.

URL: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/01/15/exclusive-secret-state-department-cable-chemical-weapons-used-in-syria/> (accessed: 20.01.2023)

<sup>678</sup> *Tsyganok A.* US and NATO intervention... (In Russ.). P. 181.

<sup>679</sup> *Nikitin M.B., Kerr P., Feickert A.* Syria’s Chemical Weapons: Issues for Congress // Congressional Research Service.

August 30, 2013. P. 9.

<sup>680</sup> Background Conference Call by White House Official on Syria // The White House. April 25, 2013. URL:

<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/04/25/background-conference-call-white-house-official-syria> (accessed: 20.01.2023)

increased.”<sup>681</sup> In fact, from what Rhodes said, one can safely conclude only that those chemical attacks actually took place in Syria, but this information did not expose the perpetrators of them. Similar conclusions were reached by experts from various countries.<sup>682</sup>

Finally, in August 2013, an event occurred that became the cornerstone of the Syrian chemical weapons crisis. On the night of August 20-21, exactly one year after Obama's “red line” announcement, eight locations in the opposition-controlled suburbs of Damascus showed similar signs of poisoning in scores of people. This event, by another incredible coincidence, happened exactly the same day when UN inspectors arrived in Damascus to investigate possible cases of the use of chemical weapons in the country. Washington immediately reacted to the incident, demanding that the UN urgently launch an investigation into this incident.<sup>683</sup> Interestingly, the next day, State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki strongly denied the involvement of the opposition in the incident, because “they do not have the ability to use chemical weapons.”<sup>684</sup>

Initially, the United States was in no hurry to make statements directly accusing the Syrian leadership of carrying out a chemical attack. However, with every day Washington's rhetoric became more and more harsh. On August 23, White House spokesman Josh Earnest said that Obama was considering “all options regarding Syria,” but also clarified that the president did not consider sending American troops “on the ground” as the best option.<sup>685</sup> It is noteworthy that here it was only about sending ground troops, nothing was said about the absence of the need for air or missile strikes. Moreover, as we can judge from the memoirs of US Secretary of State John Kerry, on that day the NSC already “focused on how – not whether – we would strike.”<sup>686</sup>

Three days later, Secretary Kerry made comments on Syria. He stated that Washington has facts at its disposal which indicate that it is the Assad government that is responsible for the attack, which is now destroying all evidence of its involvement, allegedly detaining UN inspectors and preventing them from visiting the sites of the tragedy.<sup>687</sup>

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<sup>681</sup> Nikitin M.B., Kerr P., Feickert A. Syria's Chemical Weapons... P. 10.

<sup>682</sup> Lynch C., Warrick J. In Syrian chemical weapons claim, criticism about lack of transparency // The Washington Post. June 20, 2013. URL: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-syrian-chemical-weapons-claim-criticism-about-lack-of-transparency/2013/06/20/fa799e6e-d925-11e2-a016-92547bf094cc\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-syrian-chemical-weapons-claim-criticism-about-lack-of-transparency/2013/06/20/fa799e6e-d925-11e2-a016-92547bf094cc_story.html) (accessed: 20.01.2023)

<sup>683</sup> Statement by Principal Deputy Press Secretary Josh Earnest on Allegations of Chemical Weapons Use in Syria // The White House. August 21, 2013. URL: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/08/21/statement-principal-deputy-press-secretary-josh-earnest-allegations-chem> (accessed: 20.01.2023)

<sup>684</sup> Daily Press Briefing – August 22, 2013 // U.S. Department of State. August 22, 2013. URL: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2013/08/213398.htm> (accessed: 20.01.2023)

<sup>685</sup> Press Gaggle by Principal Deputy Press Secretary Josh Earnest // The White House. August 23, 2013. URL: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/08/23/press-gaggle-principal-deputy-press-secretary-josh-earnest-8232013> (accessed: 20.01.2023)

<sup>686</sup> The Open Wound / Kerry J. Every Day Is Extra. Simon & Shuster, 2018. 640 p.

<sup>687</sup> Remarks on Syria // U.S. Department of State. August 26, 2013. URL: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/08/213503.htm> (accessed: 20.01.2023)

Important developments of the situation occurred on 30 and 31 of August. First, Secretary Kerry made a statement. He reported surprisingly accurate death tolls (1,429 people, including 426 children) and stated that the United States knew for sure where the chemical munitions fired from, and that this place was under the control of government forces. At the same time, the Secretary of State added that the response to Assad's actions would be “limited,” since the solution to the conflict should be “political.”<sup>688</sup> Then President Obama himself made a statement. He finally announced that he had made a decision on limited strikes against targets belonging to the Syrian regime without the approval of the UNSC, but with the proviso that he would pass this decision through Congress.<sup>689</sup>

It is noteworthy that this statement looked like a game of all-in. In fact, the United States was left without allies in this event. The British Parliament has refused to take part in any military action against Syria.<sup>690</sup> Germany did not even participate in the Libyan intervention “approved” by the UNSC, so participation in an independent operation was out of the question. In the Security Council itself, Russia and China have already blocked Western resolutions on Syria three times. Only France, the former metropolis of Syria, expressed its readiness to participate in the US operation.<sup>691</sup> In the end, the only hope was to inspire the allies with a “power of the example” that would change their minds. Even more curiously, just three months earlier, Obama had moved his “red line,” declaring that intervention in the Syrian conflict would take place only with the support of the international community.<sup>692</sup>

At the same time, bringing such an issue to Congress was a risky move (and, moreover, not at all obligatory.<sup>693</sup> and not approved by members of the Obama foreign policy team<sup>694</sup>). Before the eyes of the congressmen was an unfortunate example, firstly, of the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, and secondly, of their fellow parliamentarians in London<sup>695</sup>. They did not understand why this particular case suddenly became so important, as if the previous ones did not matter, since the United States did nothing; they did not understand how this strike would protect the interests of the United States, what was its purpose. The deputies also wanted to see a clearer ban on ground operations and did not want to get involved in the war “for emotional reasons,” following the precept of President Eisenhower.<sup>696</sup> Thus,

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<sup>688</sup> Statement on Syria // U.S. Department of State. August 30, 2013. URL: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/08/213668.htm> (accessed: 20.01.2023)

<sup>689</sup> Statement by the President on Syria // The White House. August 31, 2013. URL: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/08/31/statement-president-syria> (accessed: 20.01.2023)

<sup>690</sup> British Parliament Closes Door On Syria Intervention // National Public Radio. August 29, 2013. URL: <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2013/08/29/216933582/british-parliament-rejects-syria-intervention-in-symbolic-vote> (accessed: 20.01.2023)

<sup>691</sup> *Chrisafis A.* France expected to replace UK as key US ally in Syria intervention // The Guardian. August 30, 2013. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/aug/30/france-us-ally-syria-intervention> (accessed: 20.01.2023)

<sup>692</sup> *Nicholas P., Entous A.* U.S. Sets Hurdles to Intervention in Syria // The Wall Street Journal. April 30, 2013. URL: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887323982704578454940008959514.html> (accessed: 20.01.2023)

<sup>693</sup> *Borshchevskaya A.* Putin's War in Syria... P. 112-113.

<sup>694</sup> *Bezrukov A.* US Strategy in Syria... (In Russ.). P. 29.

<sup>695</sup> *Mouritzen H.* 'Remember Iraq!'... P. 962-965.

<sup>696</sup> Syria Resolution Could Be A Hard Sell On Capitol Hill // National Public Radio. September 2, 2013. URL: <https://www.npr.org/2013/09/02/218095990/syria-resolution-could-be-a-hard-sell-on-capitol-hill> (accessed: 20.01.2023)

if Obama had brought this issue to the Congress, it is not a fact that he would have received from it the go-ahead for a military operation, which is also confirmed by the memoirs of John Kerry.<sup>697</sup>

However, according to some American researchers, this was exactly the calculation: Obama understood that Congress would not approve his plan, and then resorted to “an innovative strategy to avoid audience costs [for non-compliance with his own introduced “red line”] by shifting them to Congress.”<sup>698</sup> Finally, there is also evidence that it was Congressional leaders who sent the President a letter demanding that he obtain legislative authorization before any use of force in Syria, arguing that “engaging our military in Syria when no direct threat to the United States exists...would violate the separation of powers.”<sup>699</sup>

Soon, the “Russian trace” was also found in the Syrian events. At a congressional hearing US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel answering the question of where the Syrians got chemical weapons from, answered: “The Russians supply them, others supply them with these chemical weapons.” However very soon a Pentagon spokesman hurried to clarify his boss's statement, saying that Hagel was referring to the supply of conventional military equipment that could have been used to develop chemical weapons.<sup>700</sup>

In these circumstances, when the conflict between the United States and Syria seemed to go into the open stage, an unexpected move followed from Syria and Russia. On September 9, at a press conference in London, in response to a question about what Assad could do in order to prevent an attack, John Kerry replied that he could have transfer all the chemical weapons that he has under international control , however, specified that Assad “obviously is not going to do it.”<sup>701</sup> Unexpectedly for everyone, immediately after that, the Russian Foreign Ministry came up with exactly the same initiative, and the Syrian side supported Moscow's proposal<sup>702</sup>. Somewhat later it became known that Russian and US presidents discussed this option on the sidelines of the G20 summit in St Petersburg<sup>703</sup>, so this situation clearly demonstrated the attitude of both sides to the problem under discussion: Washington did not even consider such a (peaceful) option seriously; Moscow, on the contrary, having clearly guessed the time after the disclosure of its partner's point of view, put forward its own, the opposite, and won.

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<sup>697</sup> The Open Wound...

<sup>698</sup> Burns S., Stravers A. Obama, Congress, and Audience Costs... P. 68.

<sup>699</sup> The Eye of a Hurricane / Warrick J. The Red Line...

<sup>700</sup> The Pentagon clarified the secretary's statement on the supply of chemical weapons to Syria by the Russian Federation (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. September 5, 2013. URL: [https://ria.ru/arab\\_sy/20130905/960858141.html](https://ria.ru/arab_sy/20130905/960858141.html) (accessed: 20.01.2023)

<sup>701</sup> Remarks With United Kingdom Foreign Secretary Hague // U.S. Department of State. September 9, 2013. URL: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/09/213956.htm> (accessed: 20.01.2023)

<sup>702</sup> Russia's proposal on Syria: the reaction of the international community (In Russ.) // TASS. September 10, 2013. URL: <https://tass.ru/politika/674855> (accessed: 20.01.2023)

<sup>703</sup> Ermolaeva N., Fedyakina A. Chemistry Lessons (In Russ.) // Rossiyskaya gazeta. September 12, 2013. URL: <https://rg.ru/2013/09/12/diplomatia.html> (accessed: 17.04.2018)



Thus, in the future, the conflict was resolved exclusively by peaceful means. On September 14, the heads of the foreign ministries of the United States and Russia at a meeting in Geneva developed a plan for further action. According to it, all chemical weapons in Syria were to be placed under international control and destroyed by mid-2014, and the UNSCRs, which Russia and the United States should put forward in the near future, should serve as the legal basis for resolving the conflict. At the same time, John Kerry clarified that the decision to use force could still be made both at the level of the UNSC and the President of the United States, which clearly demonstrates the fact that Washington, under any circumstances, could not abandon its aggressive rhetoric.<sup>704</sup> On September 27, the UNSC adopted the Resolution 2118.<sup>705</sup> It is important to note that it did not spell out the automatic application of Chapter VII of the UN Charter, otherwise the Syrian opposition would have a clear reason to arrange a provocation.<sup>706</sup> The liquidation of the Syrian stockpiles of chemical weapons began. It could have been complicated by the events in Ukraine in the spring of 2014, but this, fortunately, did not happen.<sup>707</sup>

In this case, the reaction of the American media is interesting. After finding a peaceful solution to the problem through diplomacy, which until recently seemed impossible, it would be logical to expect laudatory odes to President Obama for not allowing the United States to be drawn into another Middle East conflict. In reality, however, things turned out quite differently. For the most part, journalists reproached Obama for allowing Putin to “play on himself like a violin”<sup>708</sup> and agreeing to the almost impossible plan put forward by him.<sup>709</sup>

So, in the case of Libya, the American scheme worked flawlessly. Already on March 19, 2011, two days after the adoption of Resolution 1973 by the UNSC, the countries of the Western coalition began intervention in Libya. The result of this operation, which was arbitrarily reclassified from a formally peacekeeping operation to supporting the rebels<sup>710</sup>, was the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime, the reign of chaos in the country and the rampant Islamists. But what went wrong with Syria? Why did the Libyan scenario fail here? Ultimately, there are several factors that influenced this outcome of events. The main of them can be considered the support of Russia and China in the UNSC, as well as the direct military support of Syria by Iran. If Libya had already been abandoned by mid-March, then behind Syria stood a powerful support group which Washington did not dare to contradict. Another factor was a relatively

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<sup>704</sup> Remarks With Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov After Their Meeting // U.S. Department of State. September 14, 2013. URL: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/09/214250.htm> (accessed: 20.01.2023)

<sup>705</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 2118 (S/RES/2118). September 27, 2013. URL: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N13/489/23/PDF/N1348923.pdf> (accessed: 24.03.2023)

<sup>706</sup> *Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva M.* The work of the UN Security Council... (In Russ.). P. 168.

<sup>707</sup> *Notte H.* The United States, Russia... P. 211-212.

<sup>708</sup> *Cohen A.* Russia Is Back // The National Interest. September 17, 2013. URL: <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/russia-back-9077> (accessed: 20.01.2023)

<sup>709</sup> Demilitarizing Syria's poison gas will be extremely difficult // The Washington Post. September 11, 2013. URL: [http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/demilitarizing-syrias-poison-gas-will-be-extremely-difficult/2013/09/11/80cbcd54-1b1e-11e3-82ef-a059e54c49d0\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/demilitarizing-syrias-poison-gas-will-be-extremely-difficult/2013/09/11/80cbcd54-1b1e-11e3-82ef-a059e54c49d0_story.html) (accessed: 20.01.2023)

<sup>710</sup> *Bratersky M.* American and Russian approaches... P. 43.

strong air defense system in Syria, which would not allow NATO aircraft to carry out air raids without losses, as was the case in Libya (and which was already mentioned above). Another factor that generally influenced the rather cautious nature of American involvement in Syria was negotiations with Iran to conclude, and, accordingly, “the desperation of the US president not to upset Assad's Iranian friends.”<sup>711</sup> The last factor can be called the unsuccessful experience of Libya itself, which has turned into an uncontrollable hotbed of Islamists, which undoubtedly influenced the opinion of politicians in all Western countries.

## **2.4. Direct Military and Proxy War Actions of the Obama Administrations Regarding Syrian Conflict**

### **2.4.1. Military Assistance to the Syrian “Moderate Opposition”. Operation Timber Sycamore**

Along with attempts to organize direct intervention in the conflict, or at least delay the time that worked against Assad with peace negotiations, the United States provided material support to the Syrian rebels. Washington was initially reluctant to openly support the FSA, unsure of how well its commander, Colonel al-Asaad, actually controlled “the various militias nominally united under his banner,”<sup>712</sup> which, by mid-2012, numbered over a thousand<sup>713</sup>. However, since 2012, the United States has officially provided “unarmed Syrian opposition groups” as well as SOC only with “non-lethal aid” – medicines, clean water and dry rations. Then such assistance began to flow to smaller local groups.<sup>714</sup>

The amount of aid provided has steadily increased. For example, on February 28, 2013, Secretary of State John Kerry announced that \$60 million would be allocated to SOC to “strengthen institutional capacity” as well as to assist the communities under their control.<sup>715</sup> Two months later, he announced that the total amount of assistance would be increased to \$250 million.<sup>716</sup>

Meanwhile, there was a persistent struggle in Washington to start officially providing military assistance to the Syrian rebels. Despite the decision taken in the spring of 2013 within the Friends of Syria Group created by the United States to start supplying weapons to the Syrian “moderate opposition,” they were in no hurry to implement it, referring to the need to clearly separate the “moderates” from the radicals.<sup>717</sup> At the same time, the United States did not prevent the supply of military aid from the EU

<sup>711</sup> *Harris H.* Quicksilver War... P. 42.

<sup>712</sup> *Phillips C.* Syria's Torment // *Survival*. 2012, Vol. 54, No. 4. P. 77. DOI: 10.1080/00396338.2012.709389

<sup>713</sup> *Phillips C.* The Battle for Syria... P. 127.

<sup>714</sup> *Humud C., Blanchard C., Nikitin M.B.* Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response // *Congressional Research Service*. April 26, 2017. P. 26.

<sup>715</sup> Press Availability on Syria // U.S. Department of State. February 28, 2013. URL: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/02/205435.htm> (accessed: 16.04.2018)

<sup>716</sup> US to double aid to Syrian opposition (In Russ.) // *Lenta.ru*. April 21, 2013. URL: <https://lenta.ru/news/2013/04/21/double/> (accessed: 19.04.2018)

<sup>717</sup> *Shumilin A.* The Syrian Crisis... (In Russ.). P. 49.

countries (a significant part of which were members of the Friends of Syria Group), where the arms embargo introduced two years ago was soon to end<sup>718</sup>.

On May 6, 2013, the draft Syria Stabilization Act was presented in the Congress. This act, among other things, provided for the start of arms supplies to the Syrian rebels. According to the text of the bill, aid was to go only to those units whose commanders were not members of foreign terrorist organizations, opposed religious violence and were “committed to civilian rule and the rule of law in Syria.”<sup>719</sup> It is also interesting to note that in no case should the rebels be given MANPADS, which is rather strange, given that the rebels needed them to counter the Syrian aircraft. Perhaps the author of the bill was afraid that MANPADS would still fall into the wrong hands and be used against American aircraft in Iraq or Afghanistan, and thereby hoped to make the text more “passable” for critics of the idea of providing Syrian rebels with military assistance. However, even in this form, the bill could not move beyond the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations.

Meanwhile, on June 13, the White House announced that amid reports of the use of chemical weapons by government forces in Syria, a decision was made to begin supplying light small arms to Syrian rebels.<sup>720</sup> However, on June 27, a group of five congressmen held a press conference at which they opposed sending weapons to the rebels, citing the reluctance to involve the United States in the war and the likelihood of a worsening of the situation in Syria after such actions by the American government.<sup>721</sup> American legislators rightly feared that American weapons could fall into the hands of Islamists fighting on the side of anti-government troops. As a result, on July 9, the Senate and House Intelligence Committees blocked Obama's decision to send military aid to the “moderate opposition,” fearing that it could fall into the hands of terrorists, including those associated with Al-Qaeda\*<sup>722, 723</sup>.

However, the resistance of the Congress was eventually broken, and two weeks later the President's plan was approved.<sup>724</sup> This was preceded by a long debate between the legislative and executive branches of government.<sup>725</sup> Their partial confirmation can be the meaningful statement of Secretary of State Kerry, who told reporters on July 18 that in recent weeks the Syrian opposition had already received

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<sup>718</sup> Remarks With Australian Foreign Minister Bob Carr After Their Meeting // U.S. Department of State. March 18, 2013. URL: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/03/206370.htm> (accessed: 17.04.2018)

<sup>719</sup> S. 856. Syria Stabilization Act of 2013. May 6, 2013. Sec. 401. URL: <https://www.congress.gov/113/bills/s856/BILLS-113s856is.pdf> (accessed: 23.01.2023)

<sup>720</sup> *Mazzetti M., Gordon M., Landler M.* U.S. Is Said to Plan to Send Weapons to Syrian Rebels // The New York Times. June 13, 2013. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/14/world/middleeast/syria-chemical-weapons.html> (accessed: 23.01.2023)

<sup>721</sup> A group of US congressmen opposed the arming of the Syrian opposition (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. June 28, 2013. URL: <https://ria.ru/20130628/946261218.html> (accessed: 25.01.2023)

<sup>722</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>723</sup> Exclusive: Congress delaying U.S. aid to Syrian rebels – sources // Reuters. July 9, 2013. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-syria-arms-idUSBRE96713N20130708> (accessed: 25.01.2023)

<sup>724</sup> Obama to move forward with plan to arm Syrian rebels // CNN. July 24, 2013. URL: <https://edition.cnn.com/2013/07/23/politics/us-syrian-rebels/index.html> (accessed: 25.01.2023)

<sup>725</sup> White House lobbies Congress to overcome Syria arms deadlock // Reuters. July 10, 2013. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-syria-arms-idUSBRE96900P20130710> (accessed: 23.01.2023)

a large number of weapons from Friend of Syria countries<sup>726</sup>, symbolically made in Jordan, which played a large role in subsequent events.

However, congressmen needlessly worried that the Syrian Islamists could get American weapons through their actions, since this process began already a year ago. In August 2012, it became known that President Obama this year allowed the CIA and other agencies to aid the Syrian opposition<sup>727</sup>, which, from the point of view of some researchers, was incompatible with international law<sup>728</sup>. However, even earlier, reports began to appear in the American press that CIA officers in southern Türkiye were helping to transport various weapons (automatic rifles, grenade launchers, anti-tank systems) to Syria, which was paid for by Türkiye, Saudi Arabia and Qatar<sup>729</sup>.

At the same time, special attention should be paid to the use of the “shadow networks” of the Muslim Brotherhood\*<sup>730</sup> for the transfer of weapons, which obviously did not go well with the statements of American officials that weapons should not fall into the hands of terrorists. Despite numerous claims by the Muslim Brotherhood\* that they were shifting exclusively to political struggle<sup>731</sup>, US officials unofficially said that weapons supplied to the “moderate opposition” mostly ended up in the hands of the Islamists<sup>732</sup>. Based on this, only two possible conclusions can be drawn: either the American intelligence services turned out to be so unprofessional that they could not work out “an effective way to determine those groups that could receive weapons,”<sup>733</sup> or, on the contrary, everything went according to plan, and the parcels found exactly the right addressees. Thus, the statements of some American authors that the CIA should have started supporting the Syrian opposition in 2012, when it was not yet dominated by extremists<sup>734</sup>, do not correspond to reality – even at that time Islamists practically dominated there thanks to assistance from the Arab monarchies, which was facilitated by the same CIA<sup>735</sup>.

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<sup>726</sup> Remarks With Jordanian Foreign Minister Nasser Judeh After Their Meeting // U.S. Department of State. July 18, 2013. URL: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/07/212075.htm> (accessed: 23.04.2018)

<sup>727</sup> Obama authorizes secret support for Syrian rebels // Reuters. August 2, 2012. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-syria-obama-order-idUSBRE8701OK20120802> (accessed: 25.01.2023)

<sup>728</sup> *Ruys T.* Of Arms, Funding... P. 51-52.

<sup>729</sup> *Schmitt E.* CIA Said to Aid in Steering Arms to Syrian Opposition // The New York Times. June 21, 2012. URL: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/21/world/middleeast/cia-said-to-aid-in-steering-arms-to-syrian-rebels.html> (accessed: 17.04.2018)

<sup>730</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>731</sup> The Muslim Brotherhood\* in Syria // Carnegie Endowment for International Peace\*\*. February 1, 2012. URL: <https://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=48370> (accessed: 25.01.2023) (with \*\* the organizations performing as the foreign agents are marked)

<sup>732</sup> *Sanger D.* Rebel Arms Flow Is Said to Benefit Jihadists in Syria // The New York Times. October 14, 2012. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/15/world/middleeast/jihadists-receiving-most-arms-sent-to-syrian-rebels.html> (accessed: 17.04.2018)

<sup>733</sup> Ibid.

<sup>734</sup> *Ignatius D.* What the demise of the CIA’s anti-Assad program means // The Washington Post. July 20, 2017. URL: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/what-the-demise-of-the-cias-anti-assad-program-means/2017/07/20/f6467240-6d87-11e7-b9e2-2056e768a7e5\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/what-the-demise-of-the-cias-anti-assad-program-means/2017/07/20/f6467240-6d87-11e7-b9e2-2056e768a7e5_story.html) (accessed: 17.04.2018)

<sup>735</sup> *Gowans S.* Washington’s Long War... P. 141-160.

Initially, the weapons supply to the Syrian rebels was carried out from Libya, which was also in chaos of the civil war. Then, after the destruction in September 2012 by Libyan militants of an extension to the US embassy building in Benghazi, which was used for this operation, a new supply channel was established, this time from Croatia and some other countries of the former socialist camp.<sup>736</sup> However, it should be remembered that all these operations up to a certain point were still not the initiative of the United States, but of their Middle Eastern allies – Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan. The CIA acted only as a controller of the process.

Such a role soon ceased to suit the CIA, and its director David Petraeus approached President Obama with a proposal to launch its own program. The President gave the go-ahead, and in late 2012 – early 2013, Operation Timber Sycamore was launched, aimed at supplying and training the Syrian rebels.<sup>737</sup> This program, however, could not be carried out by the United States alone, so Washington's regional partners were involved in its implementation. Thus, Saudi Arabia and Qatar were mainly responsible for the financial side of the issue, Jordan and Türkiye provided territory for arranging bases for the training and education of militants, while the Americans and representatives of other Western countries coordinated the process and, most importantly, sent supplies.<sup>738</sup> At the same time, the rebels themselves were not satisfied with the “hidden” nature of the American program: they feared that they could be “thrown at any moment.”<sup>739</sup>

In order to understand exactly where Western military aid was directed, it is necessary to take a closer look at the state of the Assad's opponents camp at the turn of 2012-2013. Initially, the Syrian opposition could really claim a certain secularism due to the sources of its recruitment – for the most part, these were local soldiers and officers who deserted from the SAA and organized their own Free Syrian Army (FSA) in the summer of 2011. However, over time, the structure of the entire Syrian opposition in general and the FSA in particular began to change irresistibly. The reason for this was the increasingly growing role of Islamists in it. The FSA immediately began to receive significant material assistance from the United States, Saudi Arabia and Qatar.<sup>740</sup>, due to which a massive influx of Islamic extremists and mercenaries flowed in Syria, first from the countries of the Middle East, and then from the Western countries.<sup>741</sup> The result of this was several processes: firstly, the outflow of truly moderate oppositionists

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<sup>736</sup> Porter G. How America Armed... URL: <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/how-america-armed-terrorists-in-syria/> (accessed: 06.05.2018)

<sup>737</sup> Mazzetti M., Younes A. C.I.A. Arms for Syrian Rebels Supplied Black Market, Officials Say // The New York Times. June 26, 2016. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/27/world/middleeast/cia-arms-for-syrian-rebels-supplied-black-market-officials-say.html> (accessed: 22.04.2018)

<sup>738</sup> Gavlak D., Halaby J. Arms shipments to Syrian rebels on the rise // The Times of Israel. March 27, 2013. URL: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/arms-shipments-to-syrian-rebels-on-the-rise/> (accessed: 25.01.2023)

<sup>739</sup> A Game of Nations / Dagher S. Assad or We Burn...

<sup>740</sup> Hughes G.A. Syria and the perils... P. 526.

<sup>741</sup> Jenkins B.M. The Role of Terrorism and Terror in Syria's Civil War // The RAND Corporation. November 20, 2013. P. 4-5. URL: [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/CT400/CT402/RAND\\_CT402.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/CT400/CT402/RAND_CT402.pdf) (accessed: 25.01.2023)

from the FSA to Europe in the status of refugees<sup>742</sup>, and secondly, the emergence of a number of Islamist units within and next to the secular opposition, who, while receiving money and supplies from the FSA command, were not in a hurry to obey it.

Having gained strength very soon, it was the Islamist units that began to play first fiddle in the Syrian Civil War. Of particular note are such groups as Ahrar al-Sham\*<sup>743</sup>, Jaysh al-Islam\* and, of course, Jabhat al-Nusra\*, which grew out of the Al-Qaeda\* branch in Iraq<sup>744</sup>. It is not surprising that the growth of the power and influence of the extremists led to a kind of “one-sided game” – the militants, while maintaining the outward appearance of allied relations with the leadership of SOC and FSA, in fact did not consider them as such, while the latter were forced to rely on the Islamists, as the only combat-ready units of the Syrian opposition, and coordinate most of their operations with them<sup>745</sup>. Thus, the founder of the FSA, Riyad al-Asaad, while acknowledging the existence of some disagreements with al-Nusra\*, nevertheless called them “brothers in Islam” and said that most Syrians look at this group “with admiration.” Ahmed Muaz al-Khatib, the head of SOC, generally believed that the United States should reconsider its decision of December 2012 to recognize Al-Nusra\* as a terrorist organization, since it professes the same goal – to overthrow the Assad regime<sup>746</sup>.

This state of affairs, in turn, led to the gradual Islamization of the local Syrian protest movement. The fighters of the “moderate opposition” units saw how modest in size and mostly non-lethal assistance comes to them from the United States and its allies, and at the same time they could observe Islamist units equipped to the highest standard. It is quite understandable that the “moderates” began to gradually flow under their banner for various reasons: from purely material to ideological (they felt abandoned by the West<sup>747</sup>, receiving so little help from it, while not knowing that the Islamists receive their money and ammunition, in fact, with the consent of the same Washington).

This was the state of the rebel camp at the time of the start of Operation Timber Sycamore – there were no single command, and the Islamists began their way up, while still in a relatively peaceful way intercepting the lion's share of the money and equipment supplied by the United States and the Arab monarchies for the “moderate opposition.” Already by the beginning of 2013, according to some experts, the FSA had ceased to play any significant role in the Syrian conflict<sup>748</sup>, although others tried to present

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<sup>742</sup> Moderate opposition in Syria as a cover story for US intelligence (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. October 12, 2015. URL: <https://ria.ru/analytics/20151012/1300552155.html> (accessed: 18.04.2018)

<sup>743</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>744</sup> Lister C.R. The Syrian Jihad...

<sup>745</sup> Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva M. The Crisis in Syria: Inter-Syrian Negotiation Process and Political Syrian Opposition (In Russ.) // Asia and Africa Today. 2015, №6. P. 15.

<sup>746</sup> Jones S. The Terrorist Threat from Syria // The RAND Corporation. May 22, 2013. P. 7. URL: [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/CT300/CT388/RAND\\_CT388.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/CT300/CT388/RAND_CT388.pdf) (accessed: 25.01.2023)

<sup>747</sup> Yashlavsky A. Extremist Groups in the Syrian... (In Russ.). P. 96.

<sup>748</sup> See: Lund A. The Free Syrian Army Doesn't Exist // Syria Comment. March 16, 2013. URL: <https://www.joshualandis.com/blog/the-free-syrian-army-doesnt-exist/> (accessed: 25.01.2023); Wood P. The Free Syrian Army is being taken over by groups of jihadist thugs // The Spectator. May 4, 2013. URL:

the matter as if the FSA was still in the process of formation, and the narrative about its weakness was the work of the regime's propaganda.<sup>749</sup>

Some American researchers have gone even further, arguing that between 2011 and 2014, even the Pentagon had a real opportunity to effectively support the Syrian opposition. Similar ideas can be traced, in particular, in the PhD thesis of the then current DIA officer Konrad Trautman, who argued that the most effective “windows of opportunity” for this were the periods from the summer of 2011 to December 2012, when the uprising developed “from top to bottom” and Islamic extremists allegedly were not yet a “powerful force” in the conflict; and from December 2012 to the summer of 2013, when SOC and the Supreme Military Council (SMC) were created, and allegedly only after that “Sunni extremists, Iranians and Iranian proxies increased enough to shift the balance of power away from the FSA and the SMC.”<sup>750</sup> However, as we have already seen above, such a picture is quite far from reality.

With a high degree of probability, it can be assumed that the CIA adhered to the second point of view and did not know to whom the leaders of FSA and SOC were transferring weapons, especially given the weak level of Western, including American, expertise on Syria.<sup>751</sup> Nevertheless, this ignorance in no way relieves Washington of responsibility for such a bad outcome of this operation.

Of course, there is no reliable information about the direct course and volume of assistance provided to the Syrian rebels during the implementation of the Operation Timber Sycamore, since it is classified. However, some details throughout all this time still erupted into the light. So, in mid-March 2013, CNN reported that about 300 rebels had been trained in the US camp in Jordan and had recently returned to Syria. It did not indicate which group these fighters belonged to, but information was provided on what kind of help they received: in particular, they were trained in handling anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons, which Washington at that time had pledged not to supply. At the same time, a channel source said that even more rebels are still being trained in the same camp.<sup>752</sup> Given that this camp was clearly not the only one there, and with US officials reporting “thousands” of trained opposition fighters<sup>753</sup>, it's easy to imagine the magnitude of the United States' effort to topple the Assad regime. Not surprisingly, the insurgents went to great lengths to maintain this important channel for foreign aid. In April-May

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<https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-free-syrian-army-is-being-taken-over-by-groups-of-jihadist-thugs/> (accessed: 25.01.2023)

<sup>749</sup> *Debeuf K.* What is the Free Syrian Army? An inside look // EUobserver. March 22, 2013. URL: <https://euobserver.com/opinion/119537> (accessed: 25.01.2023)

<sup>750</sup> *Trautman K.* Strategic Negligence... P. 121-123.

<sup>751</sup> See: *Phillips C.* The Battle for Syria... P. 76, 142-143; *Shcheglovina Yu.* Thoughts on the Syrian conflict... P. 143-144.

<sup>752</sup> Opposition source: Syrian rebels get U.S.-organized training in Jordan // CNN. March 15, 2013. URL: <https://edition.cnn.com/2013/03/15/world/meast/syria-civil-war/index.html> (accessed: 19.04.2018)

<sup>753</sup> *Mazzetti M., Younes A.* C.I.A. Arms for Syrian Rebels... URL:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/27/world/middleeast/cia-arms-for-syrian-rebels-supplied-black-market-officials-say.html> (accessed: 22.04.2018)

2013, battles unfolded for control of the Syrian-Jordanian border, where, what is most interesting, Jabhat al-Nusra\*<sup>754</sup> militants fought side by side with the “moderate opposition.”<sup>755</sup>

Over time, secret US aid to the Syrian rebels has only grown. In June, The Wall Street Journal revealed that the CIA had launched a new covert operation in Jordan to send small arms and anti-tank missile systems to Syria.<sup>756</sup> Taking into account the time allotted for the transfer – a full three weeks – the party promised to be quite large. Also, the source of the publication told about plans to transfer more and more militant detachments to Syria, several hundred monthly, starting in August. The official White House refused to comment on this information, and a little later, the Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Martin Dempsey, said that the Pentagon did not train and does not plan to train the Syrian opposition<sup>757</sup>, which, frankly, was not a lie – the Timber Sycamore was the CIA operation, which subsequently will lead to conflict between the American security forces.

Three months later, The Washington Post reported that, after a long delay, the CIA had resumed deliveries of weapons to Syrian anti-government groups from bases in Jordan and Türkiye.<sup>758</sup> In this context, the comments of John Kerry, given just the day before, are of a detain interest. Responding to questions about Syria, the Secretary stated that the FSA is in no way connected with Jabhat al-Nusra\* and does not share its radical positions, and also that extremists do not receive any weapons from the US<sup>759</sup>. At the same time, according to the testimony of the rebels themselves, the assistance provided to them was extremely small, and, scattered across the vast Syrian expanses, it made a little help.<sup>760</sup>

#### **2.4.2. The Emergence of the Threat from the Islamic State\***

Operation Timber Sycamore was in full swing, which provoked further changes in the composition of the Syrian anti-government forces. The flow of money, equipment and weapons to Syria did not stop, resulting in a further strengthening of the Islamist units. It came to them both directly through secret deliveries and through the black market, where it regularly got, for example, from corrupt officers of the Jordanian special services.<sup>761</sup> The number of extremists in the anti-government forces was approaching

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<sup>754</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>755</sup> Rebels launch counteroffensive east of Damascus (In Russ.) // Lenta.ru. May 14, 2013. URL: <https://lenta.ru/news/2013/05/14/counter/> (accessed: 19.04.2018)

<sup>756</sup> *Entous A., Barnes J., Gorman S.* U.S. Begins Shipping Arms for Syrian Rebels // The Wall Street Journal. June 26, 2013. URL: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323419604578569830070537040> (Дата обращения: 21.04.2018)

<sup>757</sup> The Pentagon has no plans to train Syrian rebels (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. July 18, 2013. URL: [https://ria.ru/arab\\_riot/20130718/950659277.html](https://ria.ru/arab_riot/20130718/950659277.html) (accessed: 21.04.2018)

<sup>758</sup> *Londoño E., Miller G.* CIA begins weapons delivery to Syrian rebels // The Washington Post. September 11, 2013. URL: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/cia-begins-weapons-delivery-to-syrian-rebels/2013/09/11/9fcf2ed8-1b0c-11e3-a628-7e6dde8f889d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/cia-begins-weapons-delivery-to-syrian-rebels/2013/09/11/9fcf2ed8-1b0c-11e3-a628-7e6dde8f889d_story.html) (accessed: 21.04.2018)

<sup>759</sup> Syria: Weighing the U.S. Response // U.S. Department of State. September 10, 2013. URL: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/09/214049.htm> (accessed: 21.04.2018)

<sup>760</sup> *Cloud D., Abdulrahim R.* U.S. has secretly provided arms training to Syria rebels since 2012 // Los Angeles Times. June 21, 2013. URL: <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/jun/21/world/la-fg-cia-syria-20130622> (accessed: 21.04.2018)

<sup>761</sup> *Mazzetti M., Younes A.* C.I.A. Arms for Syrian Rebels... URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/27/world/middleeast/cia-arms-for-syrian-rebels-supplied-black-market-officials-say.html> (accessed: 22.04.2018)



a critical mass; according to estimates as of November 2013, their share reached 50%.<sup>762</sup> Another factor that contributed to the rise of the Islamists was the August deal between the United States and Russia on Syrian chemical weapons, which paralyzed and demoralized the remnants of the “moderate opposition”, but created the conditions for the growth of the influence of the radicals.<sup>763</sup>

The consequences of realizing their own importance were not long in coming. On November 22, 2013, seven radical groups announced the creation of their own alliance called the Islamic Front (IF). It is worth paying attention to the fact that three of these groups were previously part of the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Syria, which was part of the FSA, that is, legally receiving American assistance.<sup>764</sup> One of the first actions of the IF was the attack on the headquarters and warehouses of the Supreme Military Council of the FSA, which resulted in the seizure of the delivered weapons and equipment, as well as the temporary suspension of these deliveries.<sup>765</sup> However, the factions soon had to reconcile due to the emergence of a new, more terrible enemy – Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL or ISIS)\*<sup>766</sup>, which went from “an originally regional phenomenon formed as a result of the evolution of the most radical part of the Sunni armed resistance to foreign occupation and the puppet authorities of Iraq after 2003 U.S. Interventions” to “the vanguard of 'global jihad' as a movement and ideology.”<sup>767</sup>

ISIS\* grew out of Al-Qaeda\* in Iraq (AQI), which in October 2006 was renamed the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI)\*. AQI\*, in turn, became the parent organization for the future Jabhat al-Nusra\* – Syria was an extremely convenient place for the transit of militants traveling from other countries to the war in Iraq, and the future Al-Nusra\* was engaged in transporting them across the border. When a civil war began in Syria itself, the leadership of the AQI\* decided to bring all the underground networks in Syria into a single organization. This is how Al-Nusra\* was born, which began to covertly operate in Syria since at least August 2011.<sup>768</sup> At first, AQI\* provided assistance to its subsidiary organization, but over time, Al-Nusra\* switched to its sources of funding, equipment and replenishment, becoming almost completely independent of the Iraqi branch.<sup>769</sup>

At the same time, ISI\* has grown into an incredibly strong organization, and in April 2013 the leader of the group, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, announced the merger of ISI\* and Al-Nusra\*. Abu Mohammad al-Julani, the leader of the latter, rejected this claim while insisting on loyalty to the leadership of Al-Qaeda\*, whose leader Ayman al-Zawahiri supported Al-Nusra\*.<sup>770</sup> In September-October 2013 ISIS\*

<sup>762</sup> *Jenkins B.M.* The Role of Terrorism... P. 3.

<sup>763</sup> *Shumilin A.* The Evolution of US Approaches... (In Russ.). P. 39.

<sup>764</sup> *Szybala V.* A Power Move by Syria's Rebel Forces // Institute for the Study of War. November 22, 2013. URL: <https://www.iswresearch.org/2013/11/a-power-move-by-syria-rebel-forces.html> (accessed: 25.01.2023)

<sup>765</sup> *Yashlavsky A.* Extremist Groups in the Syrian... (In Russ.). P. 102.

<sup>766</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>767</sup> *Stepanova E.* ISIS\* and the Foreign Terrorist... (In Russ.). P. 20.

<sup>768</sup> *Lister C.* Assessing Syria's Jihad // *Survival*. 2014, Vol. 56, No. 6. P. 87. DOI: 10.1080/00396338.2014.985439

<sup>769</sup> *Jones S.* The Terrorist Threat... P. 2-3. URL:

[https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/CT300/CT388/RAND\\_CT388.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/CT300/CT388/RAND_CT388.pdf) (accessed: 25.01.2023)

<sup>770</sup> *Jenkins B.M.* The Role of Terrorism... P. 3.

developed a vigorous activity in Syria, in particular, seizing the province of Raqqa with rich oil fields, marking the beginning of the financial independence of the organization.<sup>771</sup> In the end, after many months of confrontation, on February 3, 2014, Al-Qaeda\*<sup>772</sup> officially severed all ties with ISIS\*, declaring that it was no longer responsible for any of its actions.<sup>773</sup> As a result, another dimension appeared in the multi-dimensional Syrian conflict, reflecting the confrontation between ISIS\* and all other, even Islamist, groups. The Islamic State\* sought to present itself as the “real Al-Qaeda\*,” turning its abstract goal of building an Islamic state into reality, and believed that by doing so it would attract sponsors and recruits.<sup>774</sup>

The emergence of a threat of this level could not but alarm Washington. However, in this regard, it is necessary to mention the facts that indicate the connection between the US policy and the rise of ISIS\*. First of all, of course, this is “the actual collapse of the state caused by a foreign invasion that failed to achieve the goals officially declared by the United States,”<sup>775</sup> and in particular, the de-Baathization of the Iraqi army, when all military personnel who were members of the Baath Party, who constituted the overwhelming, Sunni most were expelled from it.<sup>776</sup> Many high-ranking Iraqi army commanders and Iraqi intelligence officers ended up in American military prisons, where they were recruited by the Islamists as “heavily armed, well-trained, experienced Sunnis, increasingly disillusioned and ready to rebel.”<sup>777</sup> When all these officers were released from prison, they were easily able to take leadership positions in the ISI\*, since all the original leadership of the organization had already been killed by that time.<sup>778</sup> Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi himself, according to some reports, had been held in the American prison of Abu Ghraib and was released in 2009.<sup>779</sup>

In part, the United States also contributed to the “promotion” of AQI\*, “exaggerating the military potential” of supporters of the organization’s founder Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and “trying to blame him and foreign fighters for the growing number of attacks from the armed resistance in Iraq.” By doing this, the Americans, perhaps unwittingly, turned al-Zarqawi into “a hero and symbol of armed jihad in the

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<sup>771</sup> *Kuznetsov A.* Islamic State\* in the context of political changes in the Middle East (In Russ.) // Bulletin of MGIMO-University. 2015, №2(41). P. 224.

<sup>772</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>773</sup> *Sly L.* Al-Qaeda\* Disavows Any Ties With Radical Islamist ISIS\* Group in Syria, Iraq // The Washington Post. February 3, 2014. URL: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/al-qaeda-disavows-any-ties-with-radical-islamist-isis-group-in-syria-iraq/2014/02/03/2c9afc3a-8cef-11e3-98ab-fe5228217bd1\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/al-qaeda-disavows-any-ties-with-radical-islamist-isis-group-in-syria-iraq/2014/02/03/2c9afc3a-8cef-11e3-98ab-fe5228217bd1_story.html) \* (accessed: 22.04.2018)

<sup>774</sup> *Khatib L.* The Islamic State's\* Strategy: Lasting and Expanding // RAND Corporation. June 2015. P. 3. URL: [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/islamic\\_state\\_strategy.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/islamic_state_strategy.pdf) \* (accessed: 19.03.2023)

<sup>775</sup> *Naumkin V.* Islamic Radicalism and Outside Intervention... (In Russ.). P. 44.

<sup>776</sup> *Hinnebusch R.* What Went Wrong: Understanding the Trajectory of Syria’s Conflict / *Matar L., Kadri A. (eds.)*. Syria: From National Independence to Proxy War. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. P. 48-49. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-98458-2

<sup>777</sup> *Gupta R.* Understanding the War in Syria and the Roles of External Players: Way Out of the Quagmire? // The Round Table. 2016, Vol. 105, No. 1. P. 32. DOI: 10.1080/00358533.2016.1128630

<sup>778</sup> See: *Weiss M., Hassan H.* ISIS\*: Inside the Army... (In Russ.). 346 p.

<sup>779</sup> *Kuznetsov A.* Islamic State\* in the context... (In Russ.). P. 224.

Arab-Muslim world,” which, accordingly, was transformed into an even greater influx of money and recruits.<sup>780</sup>

In addition, the territories on which the Islamic State\*<sup>781</sup> operated (north and northeast of Syria) coincided with the territories on which Washington armed supposedly “moderate” groups, which, after the arrival of ISIS\*, en masse went over to its side.<sup>782</sup>

So, in the winter and spring of 2014, Washington began to realize what a potential threat ISIS\* represents, and gradually began to reorient its strategy in Syria. In January, the US Congress officially authorized the supply of small arms to “moderate opposition.”<sup>783</sup> In the spring of 2014, the first delivery of BGM-71 TOW anti-tank missile systems was made for a single group, allegedly carefully checked – Harakat Hazzm<sup>784</sup>. However, the groups that consisted it had previously been in contact with the Muslim Brotherhood\*, which no longer made Harakat Hazzm a particularly reliable group in terms of contacts with the Islamists.

In May 2014, speaking at the West Point Academy, Barack Obama announced his new counterterrorism strategy aimed at strengthening the capabilities of allied countries in regions where US interests are threatened. He announced that he would seek \$5 billion from Congress for the Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund (CTPF), and it is important to note that most of this aid was to go to Syria.<sup>785</sup>

In the summer of 2014, ISIS\* launched a broad offensive operation in Iraq, where in mid-June militants almost reached Baghdad, as well as in Syria, where the province of Deir-ez-Zor was almost completely captured and many members of the groups that were previously located there swore allegiance to ISIS\*. The result of these major successes was the immensely increased ambitions of the ISIS\* leadership – now the group claimed to build a “world caliphate,” and the name, accordingly, was reduced to simply Islamic State (IS)\*.

During the fight ISIS\* captured a number of foreign fighters whom the United States decided to rescue. On July 4, 2014, a group of American paratroopers (presumably together with the Jordanian military) landed near Raqqa, where about two dozen prisoners (including several Americans) were supposed to be. The operation was unsuccessful – for some reason, the prisoners were taken to another place about a day ago, and the paratroopers were forced to engage in battle with ISIS\* fighters. A month

<sup>780</sup> *Stepanova E.* ISIS\* and the Foreign Terrorist... (In Russ.). P. 28.

<sup>781</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>782</sup> *Tsyganok A.* US and NATO intervention... (In Russ.). P. 132-137.

<sup>783</sup> The US Congress approved the supply of small arms to the moderate Syrian opposition (In Russ.) // TASS. January 28, 2014. URL: <http://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/918997> (accessed: 22.04.2018)

<sup>784</sup> After A Long Wait, Syrian Rebels Hope The Weapons Will Now Flow // National Public Radio. September 17, 2014. URL: <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2014/09/17/349075789/after-a-long-wait-syrian-rebels-hope-the-weapons-will-now-flow> (accessed: 23.04.2018)

<sup>785</sup> *Welch J.S., Bailey K.* In Pursuit of Good Ideas: The Syria Train-and-Equip Program // The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. September 12, 2016. P. 1-2. URL: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/pursuit-good-ideas-syria-train-and-equip-program> (accessed: 25.01.2023)

later, both journalists, who were supposedly to be rescued on July 4, were executed, and a video of their execution was posted on the Internet.<sup>786</sup> Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, commenting on this, called the actions of the militants “barbaric” and added that ISIS\*<sup>787</sup> is now “an imminent threat to every interest we have, whether it's in Iraq or anywhere else.”<sup>788</sup>

All of this taken together – both the growing successes of ISIS\* in Syria, and the unsuccessful rescue operation that ended with the execution of American citizens – pushed the American leadership to the idea of starting direct involvement in the Syrian conflict. At the end of August 2014, the Pentagon began to conduct reconnaissance flights in Syrian airspace in order to collect data on the positions of the Islamists for possible future airstrikes, while there was no official permission from the Assad government requested for this.<sup>789</sup> At the same time, a few days later, President Barack Obama in an official statement unexpectedly announced that the United States did not yet have a strategy to fight ISIS\*<sup>790</sup>, which caused confusion among the American audience to say the least. Thus, the American leadership has actually recognized the failure of its entire previous strategy regarding the Syrian conflict.

#### **2.4.3. The First Phase of Operation Inherent Resolve in Syria (September 2014 – September 2015). Syrian Train-and-Equip Program and the Emergence of the Kurdish Factor**

A new phase of American policy in Syria began with a standard foreign policy step in such situations for the Obama administration – with the formation of a broad coalition. As we noted above, unlike his predecessor, who was prone to unilateral actions, the then-president sought first to win over as many countries as possible and provide legal support for his actions in the international arena.<sup>791</sup> On September 5, 2014 ten NATO member countries (USA, UK, France, Australia, Germany, Canada, Türkiye, Italy, Poland and Denmark) agreed to create a coalition to fight ISIS\* in Iraq and Syria<sup>792</sup>, which will later be called Operation Inherent Resolve.<sup>793</sup>

On September 8, The New York Times, citing sources in the White House, published a preliminary plan for an American campaign to defeat the Islamic State\*. According to them, the campaign was

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<sup>786</sup> Hennessey K., Hennigan W.J. Rising danger prompted U.S. effort to rescue James Foley, other hostages // Los Angeles Times. August 20, 2014. URL: <http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-fg-us-syria-hostage-failed-rescue-mission-20140820-story.html> (accessed: 23.04.2018)

<sup>787</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>788</sup> Department of Defense Press Briefing by Secretary Hagel and General Dempsey in the Pentagon Briefing Room // U.S. Department of Defense. August 21, 2014. URL: <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/606917/> (accessed: 23.04.2018)

<sup>789</sup> Entous A., Barnes J., Nissenbaum D. U.S. Lays Groundwork for Syria Strike // The Wall Street Journal. August 25, 2014. URL: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-military-prepares-for-surveillance-flights-over-syria-1409005925> (accessed: 23.04.2018)

<sup>790</sup> Statement by the President // The White House. August 28, 2014. URL: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/28/statement-president-0> (accessed: 23.04.2018)

<sup>791</sup> National Security Strategy. May 2010. P. 3.

<sup>792</sup> Nicks D. U.S. Forms Anti-ISIS\* Coalition at NATO Summit // Time. September 5, 2014. URL: <http://time.com/3273185/isis-us-nato/> (accessed: 28.04.2018)

<sup>793</sup> Iraq and Syria Operations Against ISIL\* Designated as Operation Inherent Resolve // U.S. Central Command. October 15, 2014. URL: <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/News-Article-View/Article/884877/iraq-and-syria-operations-against-isil-designated-as-operation-inherent-resolve/> (accessed: 27.01.2023)

supposed to last about three years and consist of three stages. At the first stage, which had already begun at that time, airstrikes were to be carried out against terrorists in order to protect the civilian population, as well as American personnel in Iraq. This was followed by the second stage, to which the US was supposed to move after Iraq forms a new government; at this stage the American side would direct its efforts to training the Iraqi and Kurdish armed forces. The third stage promised to be the most difficult: Washington was still going to move on to a military operation in Syria.<sup>794</sup>

However, two days later, Washington's official strategy to combat the Islamic State\*<sup>795</sup> appeared on the White House website. There for the first time more decisive statements were made about the possibility of bombing ISIS\* targets in Syria.<sup>796</sup> The \$5 billion from the CTPF was mentioned again, and more precise figures were given for spending on Syria: \$500 million was to be directed to a Train-and-Equip Program for the Syrian opposition, and \$1 billion to the Syria bordering states so that they can provide assistance to refugees from this country and counter the terrorist threat. As was already mentioned before, President Obama was quite critical of the Assad regime, saying that it “terrorizes its own people” and “will never regain the legitimacy it has lost”, so the United States cannot rely on it in this fight.<sup>797</sup> Obama also emphasized that there would be no ground operations against ISIS\*, even in Iraq, to which the media subsequently reacted very skeptically.<sup>798</sup>

After reviewing the above-mentioned documents, we can conclude that Washington was going to fight ISIS\* primarily in Iraq, not in Syria. In the administration itself, Obama's strategy has also been called “Iraq-first”<sup>799</sup> which allows you to see the looming contours of the real US strategy in Syria. Washington was not going to fight the Islamic State\* in Syria at full strength, doing it only where it was beneficial to them and disadvantageous to the Assad government. It was in the US interest that ISIS\* and the Assad government wear themselves out fighting each other for as long as possible, while troops allied with Washington in Syria would receive American assistance and eventually be able to prevail in this internecine struggle. Iraq, on the other hand, had to be saved in the first place, as it increasingly fell under the influence of Iran, and the United States urgently needed to demonstrate its support to the Iraqis.

After the announcement of the official strategy to combat ISIS\*, the process of preparing for its implementation went faster. On September 18, both the House of Representatives and Senate approved

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<sup>794</sup> *Schmitt E., Gordon M., Cooper H.* Destroying ISIS\* May Take Years, U.S. Officials Say // The New York Times. September 8, 2014. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/08/world/middleeast/destroying-isis-may-take-3-years-white-house-says.html> (accessed: 29.04.2018)

<sup>795</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>796</sup> Fact Sheet: Strategy to Counter the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)\* // The White House. September 10, 2014. URL: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/fact-sheet-strategy-counter-islamic-state-iraq-and-levant-isil> (accessed: 29.04.2018)

<sup>797</sup> Statement by the President on ISIL\*... URL: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/statement-president-isil-1> (accessed: 29.04.2018)

<sup>798</sup> *Brooks R.* Why Obama's assurance of 'no boots on the ground' isn't so reassuring // The Washington Post. September 26, 2014. URL: [http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-obamas-assurance-of-no-boots-on-the-ground-isnt-so-reassuring/2014/09/26/c56d859e-44bf-11e4-9a15-137aa0153527\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-obamas-assurance-of-no-boots-on-the-ground-isnt-so-reassuring/2014/09/26/c56d859e-44bf-11e4-9a15-137aa0153527_story.html) (accessed: 29.04.2018)

<sup>799</sup> *Samuilov S., Panyuzheva M.* US fight against ISIS\*... (In Russ.). P. 7.

the president's plan to assist the Syrian rebels<sup>800</sup>, and on September 22, American planes and Tomahawk missiles launched the first strikes on ISIS\*<sup>801</sup> positions in Syria<sup>802</sup>. Shortly thereafter, the first reports of civilian casualties as a result of American bombings appeared<sup>803</sup>. Since that day, the United States has regularly launched strikes against militant positions, not only against the Islamic State\*, but also against Jabhat al-Nusra\*.

The first difficulties in Syria appeared already in early October, when in the north of the country, on the border with Türkiye, battle unfolded for the Kurdish city of Kobani. The Syrian Kurds, like their compatriots in neighboring states, have long sought independence and the creation of their own separate state, or at least to obtain broad autonomy. After the start of the Syrian Civil War, the Syrian Kurds did not join any of the warring parties, but became “a ‘third party’ to the conflict, seeking to ensure their own security.”<sup>804</sup> The United States was not slow to take advantage of this, seeing the Kurds as motivated fighters capable of resisting ISIS\*<sup>805</sup>.

In the battle for Kobani, American air force provided serious support to the Kurdish YPG, but there was too little of it. On October 8, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby bluntly stated that the city could not be saved by airstrikes alone; for this, “local equipped and trained detachments” are needed on the ground, which are not yet available<sup>806</sup>. This statement immediately gave rise to a discussion on the need to bring American troops into Syria<sup>807</sup>. However, the Pentagon began to solve the problem in a different way, starting to supply the Kurds with weapons and equipment<sup>808</sup>.

It must be acknowledged that while the airstrikes and supplies ultimately helped the YPG hold on to the city, the Kurds themselves considered the US help as insufficient<sup>809</sup>. The Turkish factor must also be taken into account here: Washington did not want to unnerve Ankara, which had big problems with its own Kurds. Türkiye rightly suspected the YPG of having links with the Kurdistan Workers' Party

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<sup>800</sup> *Hudson J.* Congress Approves Arming of Syrian Rebels // Foreign Policy. September 18, 2014. URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/09/18/congress-approves-arming-of-syrian-rebels/> (accessed: 26.01.2023)

<sup>801</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>802</sup> U.S. Begins Airstrikes Against ISIL\* in Syria // U.S. Secretary of Defense. September 22, 2014. URL: <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/603300/us-begins-airstrikes-against-isil-in-syria/> (accessed: 02.05.2018)

<sup>803</sup> Media: eight civilians became victims of US air force strikes in Syria (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. September 23, 2014. URL: <https://ria.ru/20140923/1025249327.html> (accessed: 26.01.2023)

<sup>804</sup> *Yurk A.* Syrian factor in Turkey – NATO relations: A minor barrier or the beginning of the end of bloc solidarity? (In Russ.) // Asia and Africa Today. 2021, № 6. P. 22. DOI: 10.31857/S032150750015268-6

<sup>805</sup> *Cragin R.K.* Tactical partnerships for strategic effects: recent experiences of US forces working by, with, and through surrogates in Syria and Libya // Defence Studies. 2020, Vol. 20, No. 4. P. 325. DOI: 10.1080/14702436.2020.1807338

<sup>806</sup> Spokesman: Airstrikes Only Part of the Strategy Against ISIL\* // U.S. Department of Defense. October 8, 2014. URL: <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/603403/spokesman-airstrikes-only-part-of-the-strategy-against-isil/> (accessed: 02.05.2018)

<sup>807</sup> *Thompson M.* No Can Do: The Pentagon Explains Why It Can't Save a Syrian Town // Time. October 8, 2014. URL: <http://time.com/3482713/pentagon-kobani-syria-turkey/> (accessed: 02.05.2018)

<sup>808</sup> *Letsch C.* US drops weapons and ammunition to help Kurdish fighters in Kobani // The Guardian. October 20, 2014. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/20/turkey-iraqi-kurds-kobani-isis-fighters-us-air-drops-arms> (accessed: 06.12.2020)

<sup>809</sup> *Reinl J.* Kurdish-Americans Appeal for US Action in Kobane // Rudaw. October 6, 2014. URL: <https://www.rudaw.net/english/world/06102014> (accessed: 26.01.2023)

(PKK) operating in its territory, therefore it perceived them as a threat<sup>810</sup> and was interested in their defeat<sup>811</sup>. So, Ankara even tried to prevent the movement of Iraqi Kurdish forces (the so-called Peshmerga) to Kobani<sup>812</sup>. In the long term, it should be noted that after the victory in the battle for Kobani, the Kurds became one of the main forces in the region and began to look for an alliance with the FSA units, with which they had already partially interacted during the battle for the city<sup>813</sup>.

At the end of the year, the American coalition expanded noticeably. For several months, more and more countries have expressed a desire to join it. As a result, in Brussels, at NATO headquarters, on December 3, the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL\* of 60 countries was formed. The coalition has set itself the following goals:

- Supporting military operations, capacity building, and training;
- Stopping the flow of foreign terrorist fighters;
- Cutting off ISIS\* access to financing and funding;
- Addressing associated humanitarian relief and crises;
- Exposing ISIS\* true nature (ideological delegitimization)<sup>814</sup>.

In February 2015, almost simultaneously, two major changes took place in the sphere of US national security, in one way or another related to the Syrian conflict. First, Barack Obama announced the new National Security Strategy. In general, the new strategy followed in line with the previous one of the 2010. Washington continued to “bet on the development of partnerships and collective decision-making in close cooperation with international organizations.”<sup>815</sup> However, several factors were also noted that over these five years have seriously influenced the field of international security. One of these factors, the president called “the struggle for power within and between the various states of the Middle East and North Africa,” especially explosive in societies where Islamic extremists are strong. The most interesting thing here is that Obama directly admitted that such events were a consequence, including the invasion of Iraq in 2003<sup>816</sup>, which experts from around the world have long been talking about. The Strategy also noted the huge contribution made by the United States and its allies in the fight against ISIS\*, as well as the work to strengthen the Syrian “moderate opposition,” which should be “a counterbalance to the

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<sup>810</sup> *Tank P.* Between Human and State Security: Turkey’s Syria Policy under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) // *The International Spectator*. 2021, Vol. 56, No. 4. P. 93. DOI: 10.1080/03932729.2021.1984065

<sup>811</sup> *Barkey H.J.* Turkey's Syria Predicament // *Survival*. 2014, Vol. 56, No. 6. P. 113. DOI: 10.1080/00396338.2014.985440

<sup>812</sup> *Letsch C.* Peshmerga forces delayed in Turkey en route to fight Isis\* in Kobani // *The Guardian*. October 31, 2014. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/31/peshmerga-forces-kurds-turkey-isis-kobani-syria-islamic-state> (accessed: 26.01.2023) (with \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked)

<sup>813</sup> *Kurds Beat IS\* in Kobani* // *U.S. News & World Report*. February 11, 2015. URL: <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2015/02/11/fresh-off-victory-over-is-in-kobani-kurds-seek-more-success> (accessed: 02.05.2018)

<sup>814</sup> *Joint Statement Issued by Partners at the Counter-ISIL\* Coalition Ministerial Meeting* // U.S. Department of State. December 3, 2014. URL: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/12/234627.htm> (accessed: 05.05.2018)

<sup>815</sup> *Mityashin A.* Doctrinal foundations of US military policy under Barack Obama (In Russ.) // *USA & Canada: Economics, Politics, Culture*. 2016, №4. P. 114.

<sup>816</sup> *National Security Strategy*. February 2015. P. 5.

terrorists and the brutality of the Assad regime.” At the same time, Obama emphasized the fact that the only way out of the Syrian crisis is its political resolution.<sup>817</sup>

The second major change in this area was the resignation of US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel. The head of the Pentagon has long been at odds with the Obama administration on the Syrian crisis; thus, he believed that Obama's refusal to strike at Syria after the events of August 2013 “made a serious blow to the authority of both Obama and the United States.”<sup>818</sup> Having held on to this post for a little more than a year, on November 24, 2014, Chuck Hagel resigned. The head of the Senate Armed Services Committee, John McCain, attributed this, as in the case of two previous Obama cabinet secretaries of defense, to “excessive levels of micro-management by the White House.”<sup>819</sup> He was replaced, as already mentioned above, by Ashton Carter.

Another important topic worth touching on in this paragraph is Washington's support for the “moderate opposition.” The Obama administration attempted to somewhat change a course, partly moving from sponsoring already existing opposition groups to creating their own, completely controlled by the United States. This, among other things, in some way changed the balance of power between the CIA, responsible for the Operation Timber Sycamore, and the Pentagon, which began to implement the Train-and-Equip Program. Training under this program was to begin in 2015 at camps in Jordan, Türkiye and Saudi Arabia. All candidates had to pass an unprecedentedly thorough selection for links to terrorists, but one of the main criteria here was the willingness to fight only against ISIS\*<sup>820</sup>, and not against Assad.<sup>821</sup> It was planned that by the end of 2015, about 3,000 Syrians would be trained, and in the next two years, 5,400 each year.<sup>822</sup> On May 7, 2015, Ashton Carter solemnly announced that the first 90 men had begun their training, calling them the New Syrian Forces.<sup>823</sup>

The results of the program, however, were rather unfortunate. On July 12, a group of 54 US-trained fighters crossed the Turkish-Syrian border near the city of Aazaz, but militants from Jabhat al-Nusra\*, who were nearby, considered the newcomers “American agents.” The end of this group, which called itself Division 30, was sad: in late July – early August, members of Al-Nusra\* attacked their headquarters and captured more than a dozen people, seizing their weapons. Interestingly, one of their associates, who was trained in Jordan, was struck by the fact of the attack, revealing the fact of coordinating their actions

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<sup>817</sup> Ibid. P. 10.

<sup>818</sup> *De Luce D.* Hagel: The White House Tried to ‘Destroy’ Me // Foreign Policy. December 18, 2015. URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/12/18/hagel-the-white-house-tried-to-destroy-me/> (accessed: 05.05.2018)

<sup>819</sup> *Ewing P., Epstein J.* Hagel's resignation underscores defense rifts // Politico. November 24, 2014. URL: <https://www.politico.com/story/2014/11/chuck-hagel-to-resign-113131> (accessed: 05.05.2018)

<sup>820</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>821</sup> *Wright A., Ewing P.* Carter's unwelcome news: Only 60 Syrian rebels fit for training // Politico. July 7, 2015. URL: <https://www.politico.com/story/2015/07/ash-carter-syrian-rebel-training-119812> (accessed: 06.05.2018)

<sup>822</sup> *Blanchard C., Belasco A.* Train and Equip Program for Syria: Authorities, Funding, and Issues for Congress // Congressional Research Service. June 9, 2015. P. 4.

<sup>823</sup> *Carter: Combat Training Begins for New Syrian Forces* // U.S. Department of Defense. May 7, 2015. URL: <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/604596/carter-combat-training-begins-for-new-syrian-forces/> (accessed: 06.05.2018)



with Al-Nusra\*<sup>824</sup>, which says a lot about the “thoroughness” of the selection carried out by the Americans.<sup>825</sup> A similar situation was repeated with another group of 75 people who simply surrendered to Al-Nusra\* and voluntarily handed over their weapons and equipment to them.<sup>826</sup> Events like this put the Pentagon program in limbo.

Operation Timber Sycamore also continued, but it brought little more success than the Train-and-Equip Program. So, in November 2014, Al-Nusra\* attacked two CIA-backed groups – Harakat Hazzm and the Syrian Revolutionary Front – and captured their heavy weapons, including US-made BGM-71 TOW anti-tank systems and Soviet Grads. Five months later Harakat Hazzm ceased to exist, and his equipment and equipment again ended up with an Al-Qaeda\* affiliate. At the same time, Jabhat al-Nusra\* allied with Ahrar al-Sham\* near Idlib, organizing the Army of Conquest (or Jaysh al-Fath), and on March 28 they captured the city together. The same alliance also included groups, including those close to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood\*, as well as those sponsored by the CIA (such as the 13th division). Also, the Army of Conquest received financial and material assistance from Türkiye, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the US allies.<sup>827</sup>

It is not surprising that such a spending of budgetary funds, aimed almost exclusively at strengthening the Islamists, was not adored by American congressmen. As a result, in the summer of 2015, the House of Representatives Intelligence Committee unanimously voted to reduce funding for this program by 20%, which took up to \$ 1 billion a year.<sup>828</sup>

So, what were the intermediate results of the American campaign against ISIS\* in Syria? As of August 20, 2015, the United States and the Coalition countries jointly launched 6,228 air strikes, of which 3,847 were made on the territory of Iraq, and 2,381 on the territory of Syria (that is, about 1.6 times less).<sup>829</sup> These figures confirm the earlier hypothesis that Syria was a secondary front for the American coalition, while Iraq was given the highest priority. Moreover, the October CRS report explicitly stated that officials in Washington at that time feared the imminent complete defeat of ISIS\* or pro-Assad forces. They especially feared that a more effective campaign against the Islamic State\*

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<sup>824</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>825</sup> *Ignatius D.* Lessons from the Bay of Pigs in the Syrian ‘Division 30’ debacle // The Washington Post. August 20, 2015. URL: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/lessons-from-the-bay-of-pigs-in-the-syrian-division-30-debacle/2015/08/20/f561a29e-4775-11e5-8ab4-c73967a143d3\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.0a7c558c15d3](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/lessons-from-the-bay-of-pigs-in-the-syrian-division-30-debacle/2015/08/20/f561a29e-4775-11e5-8ab4-c73967a143d3_story.html?utm_term=.0a7c558c15d3) (accessed: 06.05.2018)

<sup>826</sup> *Stuster J.D.* U.S.-Trained Rebels in Syria Surrender Weapons to Terrorist Group // Foreign Policy. September 23, 2015. URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/23/u-s-trained-rebels-in-syria-surrender-weapons-to-terrorist-group/> (accessed: 06.05.2018)

<sup>827</sup> *Porter G.* How America Armed... URL: <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/how-america-armed-terrorists-in-syria/> (accessed: 06.05.2018)

<sup>828</sup> *Miller G., DeYoung K.* Secret CIA effort in Syria faces large funding cut // The Washington Post. June 12, 2015. URL: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/lawmakers-move-to-curb-1-billion-cia-program-to-train-syrian-rebels/2015/06/12/b0f45a9e-1114-11e5-adee-e82f8395c032\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/lawmakers-move-to-curb-1-billion-cia-program-to-train-syrian-rebels/2015/06/12/b0f45a9e-1114-11e5-adee-e82f8395c032_story.html) (accessed: 06.05.2018)

<sup>829</sup> *Samuilov S., Panyuzheva M.* US fight against ISIS\*... (In Russ.). P. 8.

might ward off the military threat from Assad<sup>830</sup>. Thus, we can confirm our earlier hypothesis that Washington was not interested in the rapid and decisive defeat of ISIS\*<sup>831</sup> in Syria.

#### **2.4.4. The Second Phase of Operation Inherent Resolve in Syria (September 2015 – January 2017). The Beginning of the Russian Military Operation and Creation of the SDF**

As of September 2015, the Islamic State\* continued to move west in Syria, to its most densely populated areas, at that time still to a certain extent controlled by the government of Bashar al-Assad. According to foreign experts, Syria at that time actually ceased to exist<sup>832</sup>. ISIS\* controlled half of the country, recently captured Palmyra and threatened the Syrian oil fields. In the north, the rebels entrenched themselves in Aleppo, in the south – in Deraa. The depletion of the resources of government and pro-government forces has become apparent<sup>833</sup>. Being seriously pressured on all fronts President Assad turned to Russian President Vladimir Putin for help. On September 30, the Syrian government officially turned to Russia with a request for military assistance, referring to the Soviet-Syrian treaty of friendship and cooperation of 1980. On the same day, the Federation Council of the Russian Federation gave Putin consent to the use of the Russian Armed Forces on the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic<sup>834</sup>.

Washington's official reaction to this event followed immediately. Already on September 30, a joint statement was made by US Secretary of State Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov, during which the heads of diplomacy discussed the situation in Syria and came to the conclusion that it is necessary to establish contacts between the military departments of both sides in order to avoid various unpleasant incidents<sup>835</sup>. At first glance, it may seem that both sides immediately found a basis for constructive interaction on an anti-terrorist basis.

However, a few days later, on October 2, France, Germany, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, the United Kingdom and the United States issued a joint statement regarding “recent military actions of the Russian Federation in Syria.” Here, for the first time, accusations were made against Russia, based on the fact that the Russian Air Force allegedly hit not the positions of the ISIS\*, but the positions of the so-called “moderate opposition,” which only led to further escalation of the conflict<sup>836</sup>. On the same day, President Barack Obama gave a press conference where he said that Assad is to blame for the disruption of the

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<sup>830</sup> *Blanchard C., Humud C., Nikitin M.B.* Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response // Congressional Research Service. October 9, 2015. P. 19.

<sup>831</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>832</sup> *Curtis M.* Obama Must Join Putin On ISIS\* // American Thinker. September 29, 2015. URL: [https://www.americanthinker.com/articles/2015/09/obama\\_must\\_join\\_putin\\_on\\_isis.html](https://www.americanthinker.com/articles/2015/09/obama_must_join_putin_on_isis.html) (accessed: 07.05.2018)

<sup>833</sup> *Stebneva A.* Conflict of interests... (In Russ.). P. 67-69.

<sup>834</sup> Senators unanimously approved the use of Russian Armed Forces in Syria (In Russ.) // Federation Council of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation. September 30, 2015. URL: [http://council.gov.ru/events/main\\_themes/59272/](http://council.gov.ru/events/main_themes/59272/) (accessed: 26.01.2023)

<sup>835</sup> Remarks With Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov // U.S. Department of State. September 30, 2015. URL: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2015/09/247662.htm> (accessed: 06.05.2018)

<sup>836</sup> Joint Declaration on the Recent Military Actions of the Russian Federation in Syria // U.S. Department of State. October 2, 2015. URL: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/10/247802.htm> (accessed: 07.05.2018)

Syrian Train-and-Equip Program, as he continues to bomb Syrian opposition, which makes it difficult to reorient it to the war with the Islamic State\*<sup>837</sup> but these actions would not stop the program. Obama also called the Syrian conflict “a battle between Russia, Iran, and Assad against the overwhelming majority of the Syrian people,” while the United States is at war only with ISIS\*, but added that he was not going to turn the conflict into a “proxy war” between Washington and Moscow.<sup>838</sup> Decision-makers and analysts from Washington at that time “misjudged the chances of Russian ‘success’ in Syria” and assumed that “Russia would be bogged down in a Syrian 'quagmire'.”<sup>839</sup>

In the meantime, the US active actions in Syria continued. In early October, Barack Obama told to continue supplying the Syrian “moderate opposition” and the Kurds in the north of the country in order to increase pressure on the ISIS\*. He again specifically stressed that their support would continue despite Russia's intervention in the conflict.<sup>840</sup> At the same time, the Train-and-Equip Program was going through hard times. Back in early September, the Pentagon thought about curtailing or at least revising the operation<sup>841</sup>. A month later, a new plan was ready: instead of training and equipping new opposition groups, Secretary of Defense planned to start training the leaders of existing units (yet again after a thorough selection).<sup>842</sup> Here, however, one can ask a reasonable question: how many of such groups remained in Syria that have not yet been seen in ties with the Islamists?

Operation Timber Sycamore continued somewhat more successfully. So, in mid-October, The New York Times found out that after the start of the Russian operation in Syria, the rebels began to receive much more weapons and equipment than before. At the same time, they continue to ask for anti-aircraft weapons in order to use it against Syrian and now against Russian aircraft. Journalists made a rather logical conclusion of the publication – the Syrian conflict still develops into a US-Russia proxy war, contrary to the statements of the American president<sup>843</sup>.

The size of such deliveries can be judged from the publications of Jane's Defense Weekly magazine. So, in November 2015, goods with a total weight of 994 tons were sent from Romania to Türkiye and Jordan (from where they undoubtedly had to be transported to Syria). The delivery included, in addition to various kinds of ammunition, Kalashnikov assault rifles and machine guns, DShK machine guns,

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<sup>837</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>838</sup> Press Conference by the President // The White House. October 2, 2015. URL:

<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/10/02/press-conference-president> (accessed: 07.05.2018)

<sup>839</sup> *Mason R., Suchkov M.* Russia in Syria and the Middle East: Tactics Disguised as a Strategy? / *Mason R. (ed.)*.

Transnational Security Cooperation in the Mediterranean. Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. P. 148. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-030-54444-7

<sup>840</sup> Obama authorizes resupply of Syrian opposition // CNN. October 5, 2015. URL:

<https://edition.cnn.com/2015/10/05/politics/russia-ground-campaign-syria-isis/> (accessed: 07.05.2018)

<sup>841</sup> Pentagon reviews troubled program to train Syrian rebels // CNN. September 9, 2015. URL:

<https://edition.cnn.com/2015/09/09/politics/syrian-rebels-pentagon-train-and-equip/> (accessed: 07.05.2018)

<sup>842</sup> Statement on Syria // U.S. Department of Defense. October 9, 2015. URL: <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Releases/News-Release-View/Article/622610/statement-on-syria/> (accessed: 07.05.2018)

<sup>843</sup> *Barnard A., Shoumali K.* U.S. Weaponry Is Turning Syria Into Proxy War With Russia // The New York Times. October 12, 2015. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/13/world/middleeast/syria-russia-airstrikes.html> (accessed: 10.05.2018)

RPG-7 grenade launchers, as well as Fatria anti-tank systems and missiles for them. In February 2016, more than a thousand tons of cargo was sent from Bulgaria to Jordan. It is significant that the goods went to their destination after the truce declared in Syria on February 22, which shows the attitude of the American leadership towards the agreements they conclude.<sup>844</sup>

What can certainly be credited to the American efforts to create combat-ready ground forces was the creation on October 10, 2015 of an alliance called the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). It was created in the north of the country and consisted of the Kurdish YPG, as well as various formations that previously belonged to the FSA (for example, the Army of Revolutionaries). Two days later, the SDF received 50 tons of equipment, which were delivered to it by the Pentagon.<sup>845</sup> In the future, the volume of American support only increased.

It is interesting to note how Washington acted in northern Syria in the context of relations with Ankara. Thus, in August 2016, according to media reports, American special forces participated in joint operations with the Turkish army to clean up the city of Jarabulus from Islamic State\* militants.<sup>846</sup> However, during the same Operation Euphrates Shield conducted by the Turkish army, the YPG repeatedly had conflicted with Türkiye, as a result of which the United States took a rather ambivalent position. The American leadership at the same time called on the Kurds to retreat across the river, threatening to deprive them of aid<sup>847</sup>, and called on Türkiye not to fight the Syrian Kurds, calling all these actions of Ankara inconsistent with the United States.<sup>848</sup> Washington again found itself between two fires here, in a situation where two of its most important allies almost started a war between themselves, and the second one, the SDF, even had a certain split: the Kurds did not want to leave their territory, while pro-Turkish Arab groups supported its patron.

But more importantly, in the same October, the United States began to establish bases in the territory controlled by the Kurdish militias. So, in the same October 2015, two air bases were created in the northeast, in the province of Al-Hasaka and in the Rumeilan region, and another one in March 2016, in the region of the city of Ain El-Arab (aka the aforementioned Kobani).<sup>849</sup> In addition to aviation, US

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<sup>844</sup> Jane's reveals details of US arms shipments to Syrian opposition (In Russ.) // Lenta.ru. April 13, 2016. URL: [https://lenta.ru/news/2016/04/13/another\\_express/](https://lenta.ru/news/2016/04/13/another_express/) (accessed: 10.05.2018)

<sup>845</sup> U.S.-aided Syrian Forces Complete Successful Anti-ISIL\* Military Actions // U.S. Department of Defense. November 4, 2015. URL: <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/627719/us-aided-syrian-forces-complete-successful-anti-isil-military-actions/> (accessed: 10.05.2018) (with \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked)

<sup>846</sup> US Special Forces join Turkish troops in Syria // CNN. September 16, 2016. URL: <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/09/16/politics/new-us-mission-syria/> (accessed: 10.05.2018)

<sup>847</sup> Remarks by Vice President Joe Biden and Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim at a Press Availability // The White House. August 25, 2016. URL: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/08/25/remarks-vice-president-joe-biden-and-turkish-prime-minister-binali> (accessed: 26.01.2023)

<sup>848</sup> U.S. says clashes between Turkish forces and opposition in Syria 'unacceptable' // Reuters. August 29, 2016. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey-usa-idUSKCN1140SE> (accessed: 26.01.2023)

<sup>849</sup> Turkish agency publishes data on US bases in Syria (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. July 19, 2017. URL: <https://ria.ru/syria/20170719/1498774287.html> (accessed: 10.05.2018)

special forces were also based at these bases – 50 fighters were sent there in November 2015 (as the American side later explained, to adjust aviation)<sup>850</sup>. Six months later, Obama decided to increase the number of special forces in Syria by deploying another 250 people there<sup>851</sup>. Thus, the American leadership gradually began to revise its previous promises not to send ground troops to Syria, seeing the need, firstly, for closer interaction with local forces, and secondly, for the separation of the SDF and Türkiye from each other.

Speaking about the split within the pro-American coalition, one more split should be noted, this time purely intra-American, between the Pentagon and the CIA. The rivalry between these two major US enforcement departments against the backdrop of the war in Syria has grown every year due to the lack of subordination and coordination of actions between them. This resulted in an almost outright inter-agency feud by the end of Obama's presidency<sup>852</sup>.

Back in 2012, there was a conflict between the CIA and the Pentagon Intelligence Agency (DIA) on the basis of a different approach to supporting the Syrian opposition. The DIA, then directed by Michael Flynn, President Donald Trump's future National Security Advisor, warned of the prospect of a “Salafi state” in eastern Syria as the Syrian opposition was dominated by Islamic extremists. The CIA, on the other hand, considered the Islamists as a “useful tool” to overthrow the Assad regime, and therefore launched Operation Timber Sycamore<sup>853</sup>. However, Flynn's immediate superiors, the heads of the Pentagon and the JCS, then spoke in support of the implementation of the CIA program<sup>854</sup>.

Over time, however, the conflict between departments only grew stronger. The aggravation of the situation was facilitated by the start of operation against ISIS<sup>855</sup>, which sharply raised the role of the Department of Defense in the Syrian events. Thus, by launching its Train-and-Equip Program, the Pentagon “entered the territory” of the CIA and its Operation Timber Sycamore, which were not coordinated with each other. It even led to a direct clash between Syrian opposition groups supported by the CIA on the one hand and the Pentagon on the other<sup>856</sup>. Another clear indication of the inter-agency standoff was the conflict over who should be in charge of the combat drone campaign against terrorist

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<sup>850</sup> *Tsyganok A.* US and NATO intervention... (In Russ.). P. 42.

<sup>851</sup> *Jaffe G., Ryan M., DeYoung K.* Obama outlines plans to expand U.S. Special Operations forces in Syria // The Washington Post. April 25, 2016. URL: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-to-announce-plans-to-grow-us-special-operations-force-in-syria/2016/04/24/93a2108a-0a6a-11e6-a6b6-2e6de3695b0e\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-to-announce-plans-to-grow-us-special-operations-force-in-syria/2016/04/24/93a2108a-0a6a-11e6-a6b6-2e6de3695b0e_story.html) (accessed: 11.05.2018)

<sup>852</sup> *Mardasov A.* CIA vs. Pentagon (In Russ.) // Free Press. September 24, 2015. URL: <https://svpressa.ru/war21/article/132524/> (accessed: 26.01.2023)

<sup>853</sup> *Hoff B.* Declassifying the Syrian Jihad: CIA vs. the Pentagon // AntiWar.com. June 28, 2016. URL: [https://original.antiwar.com/brad\\_hoff/2016/06/27/declassifying-syrian-jihad-cia-vs-pentagon/](https://original.antiwar.com/brad_hoff/2016/06/27/declassifying-syrian-jihad-cia-vs-pentagon/) (accessed: 26.01.2023)

<sup>854</sup> Pentagon backed recommendation for U.S. to arm Syrian rebels // Reuters. February 8, 2013. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/usa-syria-pentagon-idINDEE9160KB20130207> (accessed: 26.01.2023)

<sup>855</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>856</sup> *Moran R.* CIA-backed rebels fight Pentagon-backed rebels in Syria // American Thinker. March 27, 2016. URL: [https://www.americanthinker.com/blog/2016/03/ciabacked\\_rebels\\_fight\\_pentagonbacked\\_rebels\\_in\\_syria.html](https://www.americanthinker.com/blog/2016/03/ciabacked_rebels_fight_pentagonbacked_rebels_in_syria.html) (accessed: 26.01.2023)

leaders in Syria, in which the CIA was able to defend its position thanks to the patronage of the Congressional Committees on Intelligence.<sup>857</sup> Thus, internal strife also had a serious impact on US policy in Syria.

It should also be noted that in connection with the start of the operation of the Russian Aerospace Forces in Syria, the conflict became even more complicated – now the planes of two nuclear powers, the United States and Russia, were operating in the sky at once, so that any incident in the sky could provoke far-reaching consequences. To prevent such incidents, both countries almost immediately signed a memorandum on ensuring flight safety, as there have already been several cases of dangerous encounters between Russian and American aircraft.<sup>858</sup>

Russia failed to reach such agreements with other countries, which ultimately resulted in an incident with the downing of a Russian Su-24 bomber by a Turkish F-16C fighter on November 24, 2015. In this case, the position of the United States is interesting: it reacted to this event more than passively. At the official level, Secretary of State John Kerry in a telephone conversation with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, expressed his condolences, as well as hope for dialogue between Türkiye and Russia and a peaceful settlement of the conflict in Syria.<sup>859</sup> In the Turkish-Russian conflict itself, Washington took a rather wait-and-see position, formally, however, in accordance with its allied obligations supporting Türkiye. Obviously, the reason for such tactics of Washington lay in its dual position at the moment. On the one hand, it was important to support Türkiye as a member of NATO and an important ally in the campaign against ISIS\*. On the other hand, for the sake of Türkiye alone it was impossible to unnecessarily aggravate relations with Russia, which the United States was still trying to convince to change its position towards Assad. Thus, the Obama administration left the right to resolve this conflict to the injured parties.

At the same time, it should be noted that the United States has received a certain benefit from Russia's entry into the conflict, shifting the responsibility for attacks on government troops or civilians to Russian aircraft at every opportunity. So, on December 6, 2015, a SAA base in the province of Deir-ez-Zor was attacked, as a result of which three soldiers were killed, 13 were injured and damage was caused to the infrastructure of the base. As a result, the Syrian government blamed the American coalition planes for the strike, in response to which Washington hastened to shift the responsibility to Russian planes.<sup>860</sup>

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<sup>857</sup> *Miller G.* U.S. launches secret drone campaign to hunt Islamic State\* leaders in Syria // The Washington Post. September 1, 2015. URL: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-launches-secret-drone-campaign-to-hunt-islamic-state-leaders-in-syria/2015/09/01/723b3e04-5033-11e5-933e-7d06c647a395\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-launches-secret-drone-campaign-to-hunt-islamic-state-leaders-in-syria/2015/09/01/723b3e04-5033-11e5-933e-7d06c647a395_story.html) (accessed: 26.01.2023) (with \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked)

<sup>858</sup> *Gavrilov Yu.* The pilots will drift apart in the sky (In Russ.) // Rossiyskaya gazeta. October 20, 2015. URL: <https://rg.ru/2015/10/20/konashenkov-site.html> (accessed: 11.05.2018)

<sup>859</sup> Secretary Kerry's Call with Foreign Minister Lavrov // U.S. Department of State. November 24, 2015. URL: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/11/250006.htm> (accessed: 11.05.2018)

<sup>860</sup> *Saad H., Schmitt E.* Syria Blames U.S. in Base Bombing, but Americans Blame Russia // The New York Times. December 7, 2015. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/08/world/middleeast/syria-airstrikes.html> (accessed: 12.05.2018)

But if the December incident could still be somehow let blow over, then the air strike in the same province of Deir-ez-Zor on September 17, 2016, when 62 SAA fighters died, and ISIS\*<sup>861</sup> took advantage of this and went on the offensive, could not be ignored so simply. In addition, “it would be naive to assume that... the US, with its advanced satellite systems, UAVs and theater knowledge, did not know about the presence of Syrian soldiers in this place or were so careless that they did not determine who they were killing.”<sup>862</sup> It is symbolic that this happened just a few days after the conclusion of the ceasefire agreements reached by the heads of the US and Russian foreign ministries.

A detailed examination of the course of Operation Inherent Resolve goes beyond our goals. However, some understanding of its interim results at the end of 2016 will help us to get a more complete picture of the Syrian policy of the Barack Obama administration. So, in December 2016, a senior official from the US Department of Defense told CNN that according to the most conservative estimates, since the beginning of the American operation against the Islamic State\*, this group has lost about 50 thousand people, and has also lost the ability to recruit thousands of new recruits, as it did it in past years.<sup>863</sup> At the same time, these figures are extremely difficult to trust, since it is not possible to verify them.

If we turn to more official and verifiable figures, such as the number of airstrikes on militant positions and infrastructure, then here the picture is not entirely in favor of the United States and its coalition. By December 31, 2016, the number of strikes, both aviation and artillery, exceeded 17 thousand, of which 6,408 fell on Syria<sup>864</sup>. Thus, compared to August 2015, the proportionality in the strikes between Iraq and Syria not only did not improve, but, on the contrary, worsened in favor of the former – the ratio changed from 1.6 to 1.7. Moreover, by the beginning of July 2016, the difference between the number of strikes against Syria and Iraq was almost twofold – 9,099 against 4,710.<sup>865</sup> This, in turn, casts doubt on the assertion of American government experts that the “skew” on Iraqi side was observed only at the beginning of the operation, and then the situation straightened out.<sup>866</sup> At the same time, for comparison, Russia, inflicted 71,000 strikes in Syria over a shorter period of time (15 months versus 21 for the United States)<sup>867</sup>. Moreover, in the first six months of the operation, Russian pilots made up to 96 sorties daily, which at that time was approximately comparable to the monthly results of the American coalition.<sup>868</sup>

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<sup>861</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>862</sup> Paphiti A., Bachmann S.-D. Syria: A Legacy of Western Foreign-Policy Failure // Middle East Policy. 2018, Vol. XXV, No. 2. P. 137.

<sup>863</sup> Military: 50,000 ISIS\* fighters killed // CNN. December 9, 2016. URL: <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/12/09/politics/isis-dead-us-military/> (accessed: 27.04.2018)

<sup>864</sup> Operation Inherent Resolve Lead Inspector General Quarterly Report to the United States Congress. October 1, 2016 – December 31, 2016. P. 30. URL: <https://oig.usaid.gov/node/1304> (accessed: 27.01.2023)

<sup>865</sup> Shumilin A. The Evolution of US Approaches... (In Russ.). P. 50.

<sup>866</sup> Blanchard C., Humud C. The Islamic State\* and U.S. Policy // Congressional Research Service. December 8, 2015. P. 23.

<sup>867</sup> Aerospace Forces eliminated 35 thousand militants during the operation in Syria (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. December 25, 2016. URL: <https://ria.ru/syria/20161222/1484308153.html> (accessed: 12.05.2018)

<sup>868</sup> Batyuk V. USA vs. ISIS\*... (In Russ.). P. 13.

Of course, these numbers alone are not enough to fully compare Russian and Western/American military operations in Syria. At a minimum, it is also necessary to consider actions “on the ground”, where government and pro-government Syrian troops fought against the Islamic State\*<sup>869</sup> on the one hand, and the Syrian Democratic Forces and a number of other “moderate oppositionists” on the other. However, it is rather difficult to make a quantitative comparison here. It can only be noted that the former fought in the most densely populated areas of the country and, logically, are responsible for the greater “grinding” of ISIS\* manpower, while the latter took control of the Syrian oil resources that bring ISIS\* the most valuable income. Finally, it is also worth remembering that the United States and its allies have taken the brunt of the fight against ISIS\* in Iraq. Thus, we can conclude that the contribution of the United States and its allies to the fight against Islamists was, although significant, but at least not as great and comprehensive as the United States itself claimed.

## 2.5. Obama Administrations Sanctions Policy on Syria

The US sanctions policy towards Syria, in connection with the role assigned to it in Washington, deserves special attention. Let's start with the fact that sanctions were imposed on Syria by the United States back in 1979, when the former was included in the list of States Sponsors of Terrorism. As a member of this list, Syria was deprived of the opportunity to acquire American weapons and receive economic assistance. In addition, strict export control on dual-use goods were introduced in relation to Damascus, as well as various financial restrictions<sup>870</sup>. However, Syria very soon found a way to bypass these restrictions with the help of neighboring Lebanon<sup>871</sup>.

A new wave of U.S. sanctions on Syria followed shortly after the outbreak of the Iraq War and was based on the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2003, or SALSRA, passed by the U.S. Congress in December 2003. The reasons for the introduction of new sanctions by American legislators were found to be many – from interventions in Lebanon’s internal affairs mentioned directly in the title of the law to support for Iraq and the development of chemical, biological and even nuclear weapons<sup>872</sup>.

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<sup>869</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>870</sup> States Sponsors of Terrorism / Country Reports on Terrorism 2010 // U.S. Department of State. August 18, 2011. URL: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2010/170260.htm> (accessed: 22.01.2023)

<sup>871</sup> *Reutov A.* Sanctions without consequences (In Russ.) // Kommersant. May 13, 2004. URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/473864> (accessed: 22.01.2023)

<sup>872</sup> H.R. 1828. Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2003. December 12, 2003. Sec. 2. URL: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-108publ175/pdf/PLAW-108publ175.pdf> (accessed: 22.01.2023)



The SALSRA was enforced by President George W. Bush's Executive Order (E.O.) 13338, issued in May 2004. The order prohibited the export or re-export of U.S. weapons and dual-use items, and any U.S. goods, other than food and medicine, to Syria<sup>873</sup>.

New sanctions against Syria were introduced in 2006-2008 by E.O. 13399<sup>874</sup> and E.O. 13460<sup>875</sup>. Both of them were adopted in connection with the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, of which Damascus was a main suspect. Personal sanctions were imposed on a number of Syrian officials. In addition, in 2006, in accordance with the norms of the US Patriot Act, sanctions were imposed against the Commercial Bank of Syria in connection with suspicions of laundering money received from the sale of Iraqi oil. As a result, American banks and other financial institutions were prohibited from having correspondent accounts in it<sup>876</sup>. Despite all this, the pre-war sanctions against Syria were relatively light and can be compared with those that “were used against Milosevic and his entourage, but did not reach the scale of sanctions against Iran or Cuba.”<sup>877</sup>

However, with the start of the civil war, the American sanctions flywheel began to spin more and more. Already in April 2011, E.O. 13572 was issued by President Obama, according to which “Government of Syria's human rights abuses... constitute an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States.”<sup>878</sup> In accordance with that order, personal sanctions were imposed against a number of Syrian officials involved in human rights violations. The next E.O. 13573, was issued less than a month later and introduced additional restrictions, already against top officials of the Syrian Arab Republic, President Bashar al-Assad included<sup>879</sup>.

In August 2011, at the same time as Obama announced that “the time has come for President Assad to step aside,” the White House issued new E.O. 13582, imposing more serious measures not against specific Syrian elites, but against the Syrian government as a whole. According to it, all assets of the Syrian government in the United States were blocked, investments in Syria were prohibited, as well as the import of any American-made goods and services into the country. Also, an oil embargo was

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<sup>873</sup> Executive Order 13338 – Blocking Property of Certain Persons and Prohibiting the Export of Certain Goods to Syria. May 11, 2004. URL: <https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/126/13338.pdf> (accessed: 22.01.2023)

<sup>874</sup> Executive Order 13399 – Blocking Property of Additional Persons in Connection With the National Emergency With Respect to Syria. April 25, 2006. URL: <https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/126/13399.pdf> (accessed: 22.01.2023)

<sup>875</sup> Executive Order 13460 – Blocking Property of Additional Persons in Connection With the National Emergency With Respect to Syria. February 13, 2008. URL: <https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/126/13460.pdf> (accessed: 22.01.2023)

<sup>876</sup> Treasury Issues Final Rule Against Commercial Bank of Syria U.S. Financial Institutions Must Terminate Correspondent Accounts // U.S. Department of the Treasury. March 9, 2006. URL: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/js4105> (accessed: 22.01.2023)

<sup>877</sup> *Mamedov R.* US sanctions on Syria (In Russ.) / *Timofeev I., Morozov V., Timofeeva Yu. [eds.]*. The policy of sanctions: goals, strategies, tools: a reader. 2nd edition, revised and enlarged. Moscow: NP RIAC, 2020. P. 361.

<sup>878</sup> Executive Order 13572 – Blocking Property of Certain Persons With Respect to Human Rights Abuses in Syria. April 29, 2011. URL: <https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/126/13572.pdf> (accessed: 22.01.2023)

<sup>879</sup> Executive Order 13573 – Blocking Property of Senior Officials of the Government of Syria. May 18, 2011. URL: <https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/126/13573.pdf> (accessed: 22.01.2023)

introduced: the import of Syrian oil and the participation of American citizens and companies in transactions with Syrian oil were prohibited<sup>880</sup>.

After a certain pause, E.O. 13606 introduced a new, “digital” sanctions dimension and a new reason for imposing sanctions – the “malign use of technology” by the Syrian and Iranian governments to “computer and network disruption, monitoring, and tracking” which, according to the White House, also “threatened the national security and foreign policy of the United States.” Accordingly, the sanctions were intended to allow “the Iranian and Syrian people to freely communicate with each other” and “enable the free flow of information.” In accordance with the order, sanctions were imposed against the head of the Syrian intelligence, Ali Mamluk, as well as a number of Syrian and Iranian security forces and telecommunications companies, which were prohibited from acquiring American technology for their subsequent “malign use” in the above-mentioned ways<sup>881</sup>.

President Obama's next May E.O. 13608 targeted foreign individuals and companies that “violated, attempted to violate, conspired to violate, or caused violation” of U.S. sanctions against Iran and Syria<sup>882</sup>. Thus, for the first time, so-called secondary sanctions were introduced against Syria, meaning “restrictions against those who are in any way associated with sanctioned persons or organizations, who act on their behalf or in their interests”, or, in other words, “sanctions for sanctions violation.”<sup>883</sup>

Finally, in August 2012, Congress passed the Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act of 2012. In accordance with its provisions, the president undertook to submit to Congress no later than 120 days: a) a list of persons responsible for human rights violations in Syria; b) a list of persons supplying the regime with weapons and sensitive technologies for human rights violations; c) a list of persons exercising censorship on the territory of Syria<sup>884</sup>. These persons were then to be subject to standard sanctions measures (blocking of property, restrictions or prohibitions on financial transactions and the export of property)<sup>885</sup>. In addition, there was a restriction on the President's ability to lift sanctions under E.O. 13606 that would have been in effect for the duration of the sanctions imposed under this law<sup>886</sup>. The conditions under which sanctions could be lifted were also directly prescribed in the law. It is interesting to note that in addition to the conditions tied to current events, the list also included the refusal

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<sup>880</sup> Executive Order 13582 – Blocking Property of the Government of Syria and Prohibiting Certain Transactions With Respect to Syria. August 17, 2011. URL: [https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/126/syria\\_eo\\_08182011.pdf](https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/126/syria_eo_08182011.pdf) (accessed: 22.01.2023)

<sup>881</sup> Executive Order 13606 – Blocking the Property and Suspending Entry Into the United States of Certain Persons With Respect to Grave Human Rights Abuses by the Governments of Iran and Syria via Information Technology. April 22, 2012. URL: <https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/126/13606.pdf> (accessed: 22.01.2023)

<sup>882</sup> Executive Order 13608 – Prohibiting Certain Transactions With and Suspending Entry Into the United States of Foreign Sanctions Evaders With Respect to Iran and Syria. May 1, 2012. URL: [https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/126/fse\\_eo.pdf](https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/126/fse_eo.pdf) (accessed: 22.01.2023)

<sup>883</sup> *Timofeev I.* “Sanctions for Sanctions Violation”... (In Russ.). P. 76.

<sup>884</sup> H.R. 1905. Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act of 2012. August 10, 2012. Sec. 702-704. URL: [https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/126/hr\\_1905\\_pl\\_112\\_158.pdf](https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/126/hr_1905_pl_112_158.pdf) (accessed: 22.01.2023)

<sup>885</sup> *Ibid.* Sec. 702(c).

<sup>886</sup> *Ibid.* Sec. 411.

to support terrorist organizations, the cessation of the development and deployment of medium and long-range ballistic missiles, as well as the renunciation of the production of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons with “convincing guarantees that that [the Government of Syria] will not be involved in such activities in the future.”<sup>887</sup> Thus, this law drew a line under all the US anti-Syrian sanctions that were imposed by that time bringing into one single “package” all US claims to the Syrian government.

It should be noted that the case was not limited to the adoption of these laws and executive orders. In accordance with their provisions, the US Department of the Treasury had the right to expand the lists of persons subject to sanctions, which it regularly did. Thus, the list of persons subject to sanctions in accordance with E.O. 13572 and 13573, issued in the spring of 2011, was expanded by the Department of the Treasury in June: Syrian Political Security Directorate, the Iranian police, as well as a number of Syrian and Iranian officials fell under the sanctions<sup>888</sup>. In the future, many Syrian officials, businessmen and companies fell under the sanctions, including the Commercial Bank of Syria and the largest mobile operator Syriatel<sup>889</sup>, Syrian Radio and Television<sup>890</sup>, the Syrian International Islamic Bank<sup>891</sup>, the Syrian Research Center<sup>892</sup>, the Russian Tempbank<sup>893</sup>, and many others.

In the fall of 2015, at the height of the hostilities against ISIS\*<sup>894</sup> and shortly after the start of Russia's military operation in Syria, the United States imposed sanctions on the Syrian company HESCO and its owner George Haswani, a Russian citizen, on charges of brokering oil trade between ISIS\* and the Government of Syria<sup>895</sup>. At the same time, the accusations against Khaswani were questioned by both Russian and Western experts.<sup>896</sup>

The last time under Obama the Syrian sanctions list was expanded eight days before the change of administration in the White House. At that time, sanctions were imposed against 18 high-ranking Syrian

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<sup>887</sup> Ibid. Sec. 706.

<sup>888</sup> Treasury Sanctions Syrian, Iranian Security Forces for Involvement in Syrian Crackdown // U.S. Department of the Treasury. June 29, 2011. URL: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/tg1224> (accessed: 22.01.2023)

<sup>889</sup> Treasury Sanctions State-Owned Syrian Financial Institutions and Syria's Largest Mobile Phone Operator // U.S. Department of the Treasury. August 10, 2011. URL: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/tg1273> (accessed: 22.01.2023)

<sup>890</sup> Treasury Identifies Syrian General Organization of Radio and TV as Subject to Sanctions // U.S. Department of the Treasury. March 5, 2012. URL: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/tg1443> (accessed: 22.01.2023)

<sup>891</sup> Treasury Sanctions Syria International Islamic Bank // U.S. Department of the Treasury. May 30, 2012. URL: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/tg1596> (accessed: 22.01.2023)

<sup>892</sup> Treasury Increases Sanctions Against Syria // U.S. Department of the Treasury. July 18, 2012. URL: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/tg1642> (accessed: 22.01.2023)

<sup>893</sup> Treasury Sanctions Syrian Regime Officials and Supporters // U.S. Department of the Treasury. May 8, 2014. URL: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jl2391> (accessed: 22.01.2023)

<sup>894</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>895</sup> Treasury Sanctions Networks Providing Support to the Government of Syria, Including For Facilitating Syrian Government Oil Purchases from ISIL\* // U.S. Department of the Treasury. November 25, 2015. URL: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jl0287> (accessed: 22.01.2023)

<sup>896</sup> The Builder and the Terrorists (In Russ.) // RBC. December 7, 2015. URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/newspaper/2015/12/07/56bc8a869a7947299f72b7e2> (accessed: 22.01.2023)

military personnel responsible for three alleged chemical attacks in April 2014 and May 2015, as well as against all branches of the Syrian Arab Armed Forces.<sup>897</sup>

In addition, sanctions against its allies also had an indirect impact on Syria. In particular, the adoption of the Ukraine Freedom Support Act of 2014 directed against Russia “brought Rosoboronexport and Russian companies engaged in defense cooperation with the Syrian government under sanctions.”<sup>898</sup>

At the same time, it should be noted that the US government pursued a rather flexible sanctions policy. Thus, in August 2012, sanctions were lifted from the former Prime Minister of Syria, Riyad Hijab.<sup>899</sup>, who fled to Jordan, despite the fact that he had previously been an ardent supporter of Assad and, as governor of Latakia, in 2011 participated in the suppression of anti-government protests.<sup>900</sup> It should also be noted that in June 2013, the US Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) urged US companies to apply for special licenses that would enable them to participate in deals to sell Syrian oil that would help the SOC.<sup>901</sup>

Summing up the US sanctions policy under the Obama administration, it should be said that this policy had ambiguous results. On the one hand, the process of adopting new and expanding old sanctions measures was well established, and in coordination with the allies within the framework of the International Working Group on Sanctions (IWGS) led to serious problems in the Syrian economy, especially in the oil industry, which before the war provided about a quarter of all government revenue.<sup>902</sup> A similar picture was observed in the manufacturing sector.<sup>903</sup> The result was a drop in Syrian exports over the period 2011-2015 by 92%, and imports – by 73%.<sup>904</sup> On the other hand, the sanctions only worsened the economic situation of the ordinary people of Syria, already suffering from the realities of the civil war.<sup>905</sup>

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<sup>897</sup> Treasury Sanctions Syrian Officials In Connection With OPCW-UN Findings Of Regime’s Use Of Chemical Weapons On Civilians // U.S. Department of the Treasury. January 12, 2017. URL: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jl0701> (accessed: 22.01.2023)

<sup>898</sup> *Timofeev I.* Sanctions against Syria... (In Russ.). URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/sanktsii-protiv-sirii-v-pritsele-rossiya/> (accessed: 24.03.2023)

<sup>899</sup> Treasury Lifts Sanctions Against Defected Syrian Prime Minister // U.S. Department of the Treasury. August 14, 2012. URL: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/tg1677> (accessed: 22.01.2023)

<sup>900</sup> Syria’s new PM’s violent past // Asharq Al-Awsat. June 7, 2012. URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20150610211938/http://www.aawsat.net/2012/06/article55241782> (accessed: 22.01.2023)

<sup>901</sup> Syria Sanctions Program // Office of Foreign Assets Control. August 2, 2013. P. 6. URL: <https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/126/syria.pdf> (accessed: 22.01.2023)

<sup>902</sup> The Toll of War: The Economic and Social Consequences of the Conflict in Syria // World Bank Group. July 10, 2017. P. 54. URL: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/publication/the-toll-of-war-the-economic-and-social-consequences-of-the-conflict-in-syria> (accessed: 22.01.2023)

<sup>903</sup> *Ibid.* P. 59.

<sup>904</sup> *Ibid.* P. 61.

<sup>905</sup> See: *Andronik, B.* An Inhumane Response. The Humanitarian Consequences of Sanctions: A Case Study of Syria // UCL Global Governance Institute Working Paper Series, 2018/1. URL: [https://www.ucl.ac.uk/global-governance/sites/global-governance/files/andronik\\_ggi\\_working\\_paper\\_final.pdf](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/global-governance/sites/global-governance/files/andronik_ggi_working_paper_final.pdf) (accessed: 22.01.2023)

## Chapter 2 Conclusions

US policy on the Syrian conflict during both Obama administrations has been extremely ambivalent. Positioning his foreign policy vision as something radically different from the memorable military adventures of the presidency of George W. Bush, Obama ended up largely following in his footsteps. Dissent in the president's team was not very welcome, and the Democratic “doves” proved to be no better than the Republican “hawks”. All this was clearly manifested in the US Syrian policy.

Obama-era diplomacy in the context of the Syrian peace settlement fared far from the best, which the State Department itself was eventually forced to admit at the end of December 2016.<sup>906</sup> The distraction to other Middle Eastern affairs in the midst of the Arab Spring was replaced by a stubborn desire to impose its plan for a peaceful settlement of the Syrian conflict, essentially consisting in one clause – “Assad must go.”<sup>907</sup> In order to achieve this goal, Washington even decided to repeat the “Afghan scenario” – the launch of a covert CIA operation to arm the Syrian opposition, which ultimately led to its radicalization and the rise of the Islamic State\*<sup>908</sup>. The Geneva peace process was also largely buried precisely by Obama's “unipolar” diplomacy, which was not ready to make mutual concessions and compromises; moreover, it tirelessly imposed new and new sanctions on the government in Damascus.

After the emergence of an Islamic State\* as common enemy for the parties to the conflict, it seemed that there was again an opportunity to at least temporarily and partially resolve the conflict, concentrating all forces on the fight against jihadists. Indeed, the Geneva process was again unblocked, UNSCR 2254 was adopted, fixing the desire for a political solution to the conflict, and soon after the start of the Russian military operation, a certain interaction was established between the two states. However, all other steps taken by the United States with respect to Syria – refusal to cooperate with Damascus in the fight against IS, the adoption of the “Iraq-first” strategy, attempts to re-ride the peace process, the constant disruption of ceasefires, the continued presentation of a number of Islamist groups as “moderate opposition” – testified to the US inability to negotiate.

In fact, in Syria, the US decided to use its two adversaries against each other so that they mutually exhaust themselves in this struggle, while taking the position of *tertius gaudens* (“rejoicing third”). The continuation of such a strategy by the United States could in no way lead Syria to “peace and democracy” in the coming years – the armed opposition would continue to be dominated by Islamists perhaps of a more nationalist persuasion, and the Kurdish northeast would inevitably fall away from the country for good.

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<sup>906</sup> Daily Press Briefing – December 22, 2016 // U.S. Department of State. December 22, 2016. URL: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2016/12/265937.htm> (accessed: 17.07.2022)

<sup>907</sup> *Tripathi D.* Afghanistan and the Vietnam Syndrome. London: Springer. 2023. P. 98. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-031-23555-9

<sup>908</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

## Chapter 3. U.S. Syrian Policy During Donald Trump's Presidency (2017-2021)

### 3.1. Donald Trump Administration Diplomacy Regarding the Syrian Conflict

#### 3.1.1. Syrian Peace Process: Rejection of the Astana Format and Criticism Towards the Constitutional Committee

Barack Obama devoted a significant amount of effort to the Syrian peace process. In contrast, Donald Trump did not display much enthusiasm for this matter, either as a presidential candidate or after his election victory. This lack of interest was not unexpected, as the incoming administration had more pressing priorities to address.

Trump administration took charge just days before the first round of talks on the Syrian conflict was due to start in Astana. However, the US government immediately revealed its lack of a cohesive stance on the matter of peaceful settlement. On the one hand, the State Department cited the busy inauguration and transition period and chose not to send a separate delegation to Astana, sending Ambassador George Krol to Kazakhstan as a mere observer.<sup>909</sup> On the other hand, Lieutenant General Stephen Townsend, the commander of Operation Inherent Resolve, asserted that the United States must participate in the peace talks on Syria and hoped that Washington would play a leading role in this process.<sup>910</sup> This created a somewhat paradoxical situation in which diplomats seemed to overlook the possibility of a peaceful settlement, while military officials stressed its significance in achieving a swift end to hostilities.

The February talks in Astana, which George Krol attended as a US observer, were positively evaluated by the United States, as they established a monitoring procedure for the December ceasefire and even somewhat initiated a de-escalation process, according to Brett McGurk, the Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS<sup>911, 912</sup>. This statement was perhaps intended to create a positive backdrop ahead of the fourth round of negotiations in Geneva, which began on February 23, 2017. However, no major breakthrough was achieved once again. According to Bashar al-Zoubi, a representative of the High Negotiations Committee (HNC), one of the reasons for this was the lack of a clear policy on Syria by the US president.<sup>913</sup> This seems to be a significant factor, given that Michael

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<sup>909</sup> U.S. Will Not Take Part in Syria Peace Talks in Kazakhstan // ABC News. January 22, 2017. URL: <https://abcnews.go.com/International/us-part-syria-peace-talks-kazakhstan/story?id=44961273> (дата обращения: 21.03.2020)

<sup>910</sup> US general: US should... (In Russ.). URL: <https://ria.ru/20170125/1486411396.html> (accessed: 21.03.2020)

<sup>911</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>912</sup> U.S. Counter-ISIS\* Representative Talks About De-escalation in Syria (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. February 19, 2017. URL: <https://ria.ru/20170219/1488326975.html> (accessed: 21.03.2020)

<sup>913</sup> The representative of the HNC al-Zoubi believes that one needs to wait for Trump's position (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. February 25, 2017. URL: <https://ria.ru/20170225/1488743375.html> (accessed: 21.03.2020)

Ratney, an Obama appointee, represented the United States at the talks, which indicated that the Trump administration viewed the peaceful resolution of the Syrian crisis as a secondary or even tertiary issue.

The Trump administration's initial lack of interest in the Syrian peace process made its sudden change in attitude during the third round of Astana talks in March all the more surprising. For the first time, the State Department dispatched Martin Maxwell to participate in the negotiations, signaling a more active role in the process. Following a brief meeting of foreign ministers from the US-led Global Coalition after the talks, a joint statement was released, acknowledging the Astana talks' contribution to “paving the way for the resumption of... talks in Geneva.”<sup>914</sup> This abrupt shift in approach was notable, given the administration's previous inactivity in the matter.

However, the US dealt a significant blow to the prospects of a peaceful resolution soon after, in early April 2017. Following an alleged chemical attack in Khan Sheikhoun, the US launched 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles at the Syrian government's Al-Shayrat airbase. Nevertheless, even then, the American stance on the matter remained inconsistent. Initially, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson stated that the US would use the Geneva process to remove Assad from power.<sup>915</sup> Yet, just two days later, he contradicted his own statement, indicating in an interview with CBS that the Assad regime would be involved in political discussions, most likely referring to the same Geneva process, to prevent the continuation of the civil war.<sup>916</sup> It's possible that the US sought to temper its use of force and show the carrot after using the stick, but such a fluctuation in attitude within two days hardly inspires confidence in the US's commitment to the Geneva process as a viable means of resolving the conflict.

During the fourth round of the Astana talks, the United States continued to send mixed signals about its attitude towards the peace talks. While the American delegation was headed by a higher-ranking official, Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Stuart Jones, the State Department still expressed doubts about the effectiveness of the talks before they even began<sup>917</sup>. Despite this, the US eventually supported the trilateral memorandum on the creation of de-escalation zones in Syria, which Russia viewed as a positive step and a “guarantee for its implementation.”<sup>918</sup>

Until May 2018, the United States had a somewhat inconsistent approach to the peace process in Syria. On the one hand, they viewed the Astana talks positively and continued to participate in it as an

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<sup>914</sup> Statement by Ministers of the Global Coalition: Meeting on the Defeat of ISIS\* // U.S. Department of State. March 22, 2017. URL: <https://www.state.gov/statement-by-ministers-of-the-global-coalition-meeting-on-the-defeat-of-isis/> (accessed: 23.03.2020) (with \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked)

<sup>915</sup> CNN: US will rely on Geneva process on Syria (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. April 7, 2017. URL: <https://ria.ru/20170407/1491693685.html> (accessed: 24.03.2020)

<sup>916</sup> Full Transcript: Rex Tillerson on “Face the Nation” // CBS News. April 9, 2017. URL: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/full-transcript-rex-tillerson-on-face-the-nation-april-9/> (accessed: 24.03.2020)

<sup>917</sup> State Department says Astana talks fail to achieve de-escalation goal (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. May 2, 2017. URL: <https://ria.ru/20170502/1493524456.html> (accessed: 24.03.2020)

<sup>918</sup> A briefing for media representatives was held at the NCUO of the Russian Federation on the topic “Principles for the implementation of the memorandum signed in Astana on the creation of de-escalation zones on the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic” (In Russ.) // Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation. May 5, 2017. URL: <https://syria.mil.ru/news/more.htm?id=12121964@egNews> (accessed: 24.03.2020)

observer. On the other hand, they stressed the importance of the Geneva Process and its unique role as a platform for a political solution to the conflict, while simultaneously taking actions that were at odds with it<sup>919</sup>. Additionally, towards the end of 2017 and into 2018, the US began to distance itself from the Astana process, culminating in their criticism and official refusal to participate in the Syrian National Dialogue Congress held in January 2018 in Sochi, Russia.

In May 2018, the US policy towards the Syrian peace process underwent a dramatic change. Prior to the ninth round of Astana talks, the US refused to accept the standard invitation to attend it as an observer, effectively withdrawing from the Astana format. While the reasons for this decision were not disclosed by Washington, it becomes evident upon examining the issues discussed during the Astana talks at that time, compared to previous peace talks on Syria. Specifically, one of the most critical topics addressed during the ninth round of Astana talks was the establishment of the Constitutional Committee, which contradicted the US's belief that political negotiations in Syria should exclusively take place in Geneva.

One question that arises is why the United States were strongly endorsing the Geneva format. There are two possible explanations for this. The first, and perhaps the most straightforward, is partly expressed by the United States itself: the Geneva process is convened by the United Nations and is held with its backing. As a result, it is seen as having greater legitimacy than Astana one, which is organized by “three authoritarian states” independently<sup>920</sup>.

Another explanation, which partly overlaps with the first but stems from a different set of assumptions, is that the Astana format does not offer the United States the same benefits as the Geneva format. Any negotiation held under the auspices of the United Nations, headquartered in New York and staffed mostly by Western diplomats, is likely to be more pro-American from the outset than any other forum. This is especially pertinent in the case of the Astana process, which is jointly organized by Russia and Iran, both of whom are considered adversaries in Washington, and Türkiye, which has several disagreements with the United States. Thus, when Pentagon spokesperson Dana White stated in February 2018 that “it's our diplomats who will resolve, ultimately, what happens with respect to Syria” during the Geneva process<sup>921</sup>, it underscores the significance of holding talks under UN auspices for the US. Furthermore, numerous US officials have made statements indicating that the Geneva process does not envision a continued role for Bashar al-Assad in Syria.

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<sup>919</sup> Speech and answers to media questions by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov during a joint press conference with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Regional Integration and Foreign Trade of the Republic of Mauritius S. Lachminaraidou (In Russ.) // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. November 14, 2017. URL: [https://www.mid.ru/ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/asset\\_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/2948275](https://www.mid.ru/ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/2948275) (accessed: 24.03.2020)

<sup>920</sup> *Bershidsky L.* The U.S. Is Now a Country... URL: <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2016-12-21/the-u-s-is-now-a-country-that-can-be-ignored> (accessed: 17.07.2022)

<sup>921</sup> Department of Defense Press Briefing by Pentagon Chief Spokesperson Dana W. White in the Pentagon Briefing Room // U.S. Department of Defense. February 8, 2018. URL: <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/1436566/department-of-defense-press-briefing-by-pentagon-chief-spokesperson-dana-w-whit/> (accessed: 25.03.2020)



There is yet another reason why the US is trying to sideline the Astana process. According to Dmitry Suslov, a leading Russian expert on US foreign policy, Türkiye's participation in the process effectively means that it has “left one coalition and joined another.”<sup>922</sup> Therefore, the United States will likely keep attempting to create tension between Russia and Türkiye in order to undermine the Astana format. In other words, the broader issues of US foreign policy are intertwined with Syrian policy in this regard.

Thus, since May 2018 there has been a noticeable shift in US policy towards the Syrian peace process. The United States has been urging the parties involved to return to the stalled Geneva process and has been emphasizing that the Astana process cannot replace it in any way. Over time, the United States has added elements of outright blackmail to its demands. In August 2018, David Satterfield, who succeeded Stuart Jones as Assistant Secretary of State for Near East, stated that international financial institutions would only provide assistance for the reconstruction of Syria once the conditions set by the Geneva process were met<sup>923</sup>. It is worth noting that this condition pertained not to direct US assistance, but to that of international institutions that are formally expected to adhere to their own independent positions.

It is important to note that the US position regarding the intervention of the guarantor countries of the Astana process, particularly Russia, in the peace process was not entirely unfounded. While Moscow initially claimed that the Astana talks were intended solely to support the Geneva process<sup>924</sup>, they gradually expanded beyond that scope. For instance, during the ninth round of the Astana talks, the discussion of convening the Constitutional Committee indicated a clear departure from the auxiliary process. Another example was the National Dialogue Congress in January 2018, which was boycotted by most of the pro-American Syrian opposition, including the HNC, who claimed that the list of invitees was strongly biased towards forces loyal to the current Syrian government. Moscow's subsequent efforts to compile a third list of members for the Constitutional Committee, which should include representatives of Syrian civil society and independent experts, were also met with evident disapproval in the West<sup>925</sup>. Therefore, Washington had reason to suspect that Moscow was attempting to establish its own, more viable version of the political settlement of the conflict within the framework of the Astana process, with the intention of imposing it within the Geneva process at a later stage.

It is clear that the question of convening the Constitutional Committee was a major concern for the United States. In the fall of 2018, they pushed for the committee to start its work as soon as possible, likely due to concerns about Russia's increasing role in selecting the committee members. When the

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<sup>922</sup> US wants to weaken Astana format, expert says (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. October 21, 2019. URL: <https://ria.ru/20191021/1560025068.html> (accessed: 25.03.2020)

<sup>923</sup> The State Department linked the provision of financial assistance to Syria with the Geneva agreements (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. August 17, 2017. URL: <https://ria.ru/20180817/1526762579.html> (accessed: 25.03.2020)

<sup>924</sup> *Aksenok A.* The Syrian crisis... (In Russ.). P. 16.

<sup>925</sup> *Ibid.* P. 17.

committee was finally formed, the State Department called it a positive step<sup>926</sup>, but soon began making accusations against Russia. A senior State Department official accused Russia of turning the committee into a “Potemkin village” to support President Assad<sup>927</sup>. When the second round of committee meetings failed, there was an exchange of critical remarks between Syria and the United States. The US accused the Syrian delegation of violating the event's rules by making preconditions<sup>928</sup>, while Damascus accused the US of interfering in the committee's work and trying to impose its own agenda. It is worth noting that at the beginning of the Geneva process, the Syrian opposition delegation consistently demanded the immediate resignation of the Assad government which can be clearly considered as a form of a precondition, but this did not bother the US at that time.

In 2020, the US began to make statements with the purpose of completely discrediting the Astana process. For example, in mid-February, US Ambassador to the UN Kelly Craft stated that the Astana group should no longer be trusted to end violence in Syria<sup>929</sup>. It is clear that the Syrian peace process no longer served the interests of the United States in any way. The Astana format was initially beyond their control, while the Geneva format, which later became the Constitutional Committee, was criticized for apparently not being anti-Assad enough.

### 3.1.2. “Small Group” on Syria

With the West's realization that the Islamic State\*<sup>930</sup> had been defeated and Syria's post-war reconstruction becoming a pressing concern, there arose a renewed need for collaborative efforts on this front. As a result, the “small group” on Syria emerged in April 2018 with the aim of establishing connection between Astana and Geneva, stabilizing the region while also fostering communication with Russia and Türkiye<sup>931</sup>. The group, initially comprising the US, United Kingdom, France, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, was later joined by Germany and Egypt. Moreover, there is evidence that consultations in the original format had already taken place in January 2018.<sup>932</sup>

Contrary to popular belief, it was France, not the United States, that took the initiative to create the “small group” (akin to the Friends of Syria Group). According to President Emmanuel Macron, it was

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<sup>926</sup> Statement Welcoming UN Secretary General’s Announcement of an Agreement Between the Government of Syria and the Syrian Negotiations Committee to Form a Constitutional Committee // U.S. Department of State. September 23, 2019. URL: <https://www.state.gov/statement-welcoming-un-secretary-generals-announcement-of-an-agreement-between-the-government-of-syria-and-the-syrian-negotiations-committee-to-form-a-constitutional-committee/> (accessed: 25.03.2020)

<sup>927</sup> Senior State Department Official on Syria and Turkey // U.S. Department of State. November 6, 2019. URL: <https://www.state.gov/senior-state-department-official-on-syria-and-turkey/> (accessed: 25.03.2020)

<sup>928</sup> On the Syrian Constitutional Committee in Geneva // U.S. Department of State. November 30, 2019. URL: <https://www.state.gov/on-the-syrian-constitutional-committee-in-geneva/> (accessed: 25.03.2020)

<sup>929</sup> The United States declared the ineffectiveness of the “Astana process” on Syria (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. February 19, 2020. URL: <https://ria.ru/20200219/1564983667.html> (accessed: 25.03.2020)

<sup>930</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>931</sup> Macron told about the work of the “small group” on Syria (In Russ.) // Gazeta.Ru. April 26, 2018. URL: <https://www.gazeta.ru/army/news/2018/04/26/11460163.shtml> (accessed: 30.03.2020)

<sup>932</sup> Isaev A. Big plans of the “Small Group on Syrian Affairs” (In Russ.) // International Affairs. April 3, 2018. URL: <https://interaffairs.ru/news/show/19640> (accessed: 31.03.2020)

his country that first proposed bringing together the major Western and Arab nations with the guarantors of the Astana process to foster collaboration.<sup>933</sup> Additionally, it was he who was able to negotiate with Vladimir Putin just a month later to establish a mechanism for the “small group” to work alongside the “Astana troika.”<sup>934</sup> However, despite this early involvement, subsequent events indicate that the group largely acted in the interests of the United States.

Unfortunately, there is a dearth of publicly available information about the “small group” activities, owing to several factors. Firstly, the association's almost entirely informal nature means that there is no need for detailed documentation of its proceedings. Secondly, waning interest in Syria and its issues, particularly in the United States, has contributed to a lack of sustained activity by the group.

Notwithstanding, the “small group” managed to issue at least three joint statements after its meetings. The first of these statements was released in September 2018, in which the participating nations stressed the need for a peaceful resolution to the conflict, emphasizing that there is no military solution. The statement further underscored the importance of adhering to UNSCR 2254 and called for the UN and its special envoy for Syria to convene a Constitutional Committee.<sup>935</sup> As previously noted, the United States had a vested interest in expediting the formation of this committee, as it was apprehensive about Russia's potential influence over the process.

The second joint statement of the “small group”, released exactly a year after the first one, was more contentious in nature. On the one hand, it expressed contentment with the UN's announcement that all parties to the conflict had agreed to convene a Constitutional Committee. On the other hand, it adopted a more assertive stance toward the Assad regime. Specifically, the Syrian government was urged to “stop actions that prevent the return of refugees.” However, the statement's most salient feature was its mention of violations of international law, such as the use of chemical weapons or targeted attacks on schools and hospitals, and its emphasis on the need to hold those responsible for such crimes accountable.<sup>936</sup> Although Assad's name was not explicitly invoked in connection with these violations, he has been portrayed in the United States as the principal perpetrator of such acts since the very beginning of the conflict.

The third statement, issued by the “small group,” was relatively unremarkable, as it merely welcomed the initiation of the Constitutional Committee's work as a “long-awaited positive step.”<sup>937</sup> More

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<sup>933</sup> Macron reveals when new 'small group' meeting on Syria will take place (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. August 27, 2018. URL: <https://ria.ru/20180827/1527288477.html> (accessed: 31.03.2020)

<sup>934</sup> Macron agreed with Putin on the coordination of the “small group” on Syria and Astana (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. May 24, 2018. URL: <https://ria.ru/20180524/1521312386.html> (accessed: 31.03.2020)

<sup>935</sup> Joint Statement on Syria // U.S. Embassy in Syria. September 27, 2018. URL: <https://sy.usembassy.gov/joint-statement-on-syria/> (accessed: 01.04.2020)

<sup>936</sup> Joint Statement by the Foreign Ministers of the Small Group on Syria // U.S. Embassy in Syria. September 26, 2019. URL: <https://sy.usembassy.gov/joint-statement-by-the-foreign-ministers-of-the-small-group-on-syria/> (accessed: 01.04.2020)

<sup>937</sup> Joint Statement by the Foreign Ministers of the Small Group on Syria // U.S. Embassy in Syria. October 31, 2019. URL: <https://sy.usembassy.gov/joint-statement-by-the-foreign-ministers-of-the-small-group-on-syria-2/> (accessed: 01.04.2020)

intriguing is another declaration, which was not explicitly linked to the “small group” and was issued in March 2020 by the “Western bloc” of the association (comprising the US, UK, France, and Germany) to commemorate the ninth anniversary of the Syrian Civil War. Among other things, the statement directly accused the Assad regime of perpetrating the aforementioned war crimes, which it described as “deeply flawed and cruel,” allegedly committed with the support of Russia and Iran<sup>938</sup>. It is hardly surprising that representatives of the Arab world, including Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, were not among the signatories, given that they have grown accustomed to the idea of Assad's victory in the civil war and are attempting to mend relations with him, with some even discussing the prospect of Syria's readmission to the Arab League.

Thus, following the evolution of the short life path of the “small group” in Syria, we can conclude that the hypothesis expressed earlier is confirmed: the “small group” served as a tool for Western powers, especially the United States, to advance their interests in Syria, mainly by putting pressure on the Assad government and its allies. Unfortunately, the initial plan of rapprochement between the Western powers and the “Astana troika” was soon rejected, and the group turned into a common instrument of criticism of Damascus, similar to the Friends of Syria Group that had passed away earlier.

### **3.1.3. The Policy of Creating “De-escalation Zones” in Syria**

In Chapter 1, it was mentioned that Donald Trump conceived the notion of establishing “safe zones” in Syria during his election campaign. After winning the election he did not discard this idea, nor did he dismiss the concept of having the Persian Gulf monarchies foot the bill. Shortly after being inaugurated, Trump reaffirmed his commitment to establishing safe zones in Syria, which he viewed as “an essential tool to contain the flow of refugees.”<sup>939</sup> In a subsequent telephone conversation with King Salman bin Abdul-Aziz al-Saud of Saudi Arabia, Trump secured his support for this initiative<sup>940</sup>.

Nevertheless, Trump's stance on the matter evolved shortly thereafter. To comprehend this shift, it is important to distinguish between the notions of “safe zone” and “de-escalation zone.” The former concept entailed a more extensive and direct involvement of US ground forces in its implementation<sup>941</sup>, which would have unavoidably escalated Washington's participation in the Syrian Civil War and potentially led to a direct confrontation with Russia and Iran. Such an approach contradicted the

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<sup>938</sup> Joint Statement on the Ninth Anniversary of the Syrian Uprising // U.S. Embassy in Syria. March 15, 2020. URL: <https://sy.usembassy.gov/joint-statement-on-the-ninth-anniversary-of-the-syrian-uprising/> (accessed: 01.04.2020)

<sup>939</sup> President Trump: I 'Absolutely' Will Put Safe Zones in Syria // ABC News. January 26, 2017. URL: <https://abcnews.go.com/International/president-trump-absolutely-put-safe-zones-syria/story?id=45062805> (accessed: 01.04.2020)

<sup>940</sup> Readout of the President's Call with King Salman bin Abd Al-Aziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia // The White House. January 29, 2017. URL: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/readout-presidents-call-king-salman-bin-abd-al-aziz-al-saud-saudi-arabia/> (accessed: 02.04.2020)

<sup>941</sup> See: *Byman D.* Six Bad Options For Syria // *The Washington Quarterly*. Vol. 38, No. 4. P. 180-182. DOI: 10.1080/0163660X.2015.1125836; *Çetinoğlu Harunoğlu N.* A Turkish perspective on the ethics of ‘safe zone’: the evolution of the concept in Turkish–American relations from Iraq (1991–2003) to Syria (2012–2016) // *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*. 2019, Vol. 17. P. 429-434, 452-453. DOI: 10.1057/s42738-019-00032-y

overarching objective of the new administration's Middle East policy, which sought to curtail US engagement in the region.

Consequently, a few months later, the United States adopted a more lenient approach, and their approach gradually aligned with the concept of “de-escalation zone.” This term gained significant traction in the context of the Syrian conflict after the fourth round of the Astana talks in May 2017, where it was first mentioned by Moscow. That is why some Western scholars refer to it as a product of the “Russian-led Astana process”<sup>942</sup>. This approach entailed only the suspension of military operations in the designated areas, with the primary objective being to provide humanitarian aid to civilians and enable refugees to return to their homes. It did not necessitate a large presence of ground troops.

The possibility of reconciling the US and Russian approaches had been anticipated by the UN special envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, as early as May 2017.<sup>943</sup> Two months later, in July 2017, it appeared that both sides had successfully merged their strategies. Following the first meeting between the US and Russian presidents, an agreement was reached to establish a de-escalation zone in southwestern Syria, encompassing the regions of Daraa, Quneitra, and As-Suwayda. According to Maria Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva, the United States aimed to serve its own interests by showcasing, through these zones, “what a 'new Syria' may look like,”<sup>944</sup> thereby indicating a reluctance to entirely abandon plans for regime change in Syria. The agreements between the United States and Russia were regarded as significant developments by Leonid Isaev, Andrey Korotaev, and Anton Mardasov. They argued that the US and Russia had effectively nullified the terms of the de-escalation zone established in Astana, much to Tehran's dissatisfaction.<sup>945</sup> Furthermore, the US soon fully supported the agreements between Russia and the moderate Syrian opposition to create two more de-escalation zones – in Eastern Ghouta (July 2017) and Homs (August 2017), and in October Secretary of State Rex Tillerson revealed that the two countries were collaborating on another joint de-escalation zone.<sup>946</sup>

However, subsequent events revealed a darker side to the coin. Firstly, no additional US-Russian de-escalation zones were created. Secondly, in November, the true purpose of the US in creating a de-escalation zone in southwest Syria was indirectly revealed by the State Department. The Department representative stated that “the opposition will not give up territory to the regime” until the conflict is politically resolved in accordance with UNSCR 2254.<sup>947</sup> It was clear that the US intended to use the

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<sup>942</sup> *Sosnowski M.* Negotiating statehood through ceasefires: Syria's de-escalation zones // *Small Wars & Insurgencies*. 2020, Vol. 31, No. 7-8. P. 1399. DOI: 10.1080/09592318.2020.1829872

<sup>943</sup> De Mistura did not rule out combining the Russian and US ideas on safe zones in the SAR (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. May 13, 2017. URL: <https://ria.ru/20170513/1494230121.html> (accessed: 02.04.2020)

<sup>944</sup> *Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva M.* The Syrian Crisis in the Transforming... P. 734-735.

<sup>945</sup> *Isaev L., Korotaev A., Mardasov A.* Metamorphoses of the intra-Syrian negotiation... (In Russ.). P. 20-28.

<sup>946</sup> The Authorizations for the Use of Military Force: Administration Perspective // United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. October 30, 2017. P. 50. URL: <https://www.congress.gov/115/chr/CHRG-115shrg37142/CHRG-115shrg37142.pdf> (accessed: 18.03.2023)

<sup>947</sup> The State Department said when the opposition in southwestern Syria will give land to the authorities (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. November 12, 2017. URL: <https://ria.ru/20171112/1508637259.html> (accessed: 02.04.2020)

resulting enclave as a perpetual “disturbing factor” for government forces. The United States took a similar stance on other de-escalation zones organized with the participation of Türkiye, their NATO ally, in Eastern Ghouta, Homs, and Idlib. When the Syrian and Russian military were fired upon from the de-escalation zones and retaliated, the United States stated that it would not tolerate violations of the ceasefire regime, thus de facto removing responsibility for its violation from the armed groups located in the de-escalation zone.

Thirdly, it's worth noting the “safety zone” established by the United States around its Al-Tanf base on the Jordanian border, which is the only zone of its kind. The United States has effectively closed off a 55-kilometer radius around the base to outsiders, including Syrian government forces. While the legality of this and other American bases in Syria will be discussed below, the focus here is on the Rukban refugee camp located within this 55-kilometer zone. The situation at the camp has become a bone of contention between the Russian-Syrian and American sides due to the humanitarian catastrophe unfolding there. The Russians and Syrians have claimed that the disaster is due to militants supported by the US military who control the camp and prevent humanitarian aid from reaching those in need. The Americans, on the other hand, blame the Syrian regime for preventing the delivery of aid and the Russians for not putting enough pressure on Assad<sup>948</sup>. As a result, the fate of over 50,000 people trapped in the camp has become a bargaining chip in the geopolitical confrontation between two global powers, both seeking to demonstrate the inhumanity of their opponent to the world.

It's also important to note that the United States didn't only cooperate with Russia in establishing de-escalation zones. Besides containing the Syrian government forces' offensive against the “moderate opposition,” it was also crucial for the US to prevent Türkiye from attacking the Syrian Kurds. To achieve this goal, a “buffer zone in Northern Syria” was created in August 2019. While the US sided with its NATO ally on the issue of the Idlib de-escalation zone, where pro-Turkish armed groups were mainly operating, they found themselves in a more challenging position in this situation. Both sides involved in the conflict were formally US allies but were also at enmity with each other, making it a delicate balancing act for the US.

Despite Washington's attempts to approach the issue in a balanced way, Ankara did not appreciate the efforts made. From the outset of negotiations on the creation of the buffer zone, disagreements emerged between the United States and Türkiye. For instance, while the US suggested a zone with a depth of 5-14 km, Türkiye insisted that it should be much deeper<sup>949</sup>. The establishment of the zone in mid-August

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<sup>948</sup> *Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva M.* The Syrian Crisis in the Transforming... P. 354-360.

<sup>949</sup> Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS\* Ambassador James F. Jeffrey And Counterterrorism Coordinator Ambassador Nathan A. Sales // U.S. Department of State. August 1, 2019. URL: <https://www.state.gov/special-envoy-for-the-global-coalition-to-defeat-isis-ambassador-james-f-jeffrey-and-counterterrorism-coordinator-ambassador-nathan-a-sales/> (accessed: 03.04.2020) (with \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked)

and the commencement of joint US-Turkish patrols in early September failed to resolve the conflict between Türkiye and the Syrian Kurds. President Erdogan accused the US of creating a safe zone for terrorists instead of Türkiye and subsequently launched Operation Peace Spring<sup>950</sup>. However, it's worth noting that the US response to this violation of the agreement by Türkiye was much more severe than in the past.

In summary, despite having far-reaching plans and a promising start, Trump's policy of creating “safe zones” did not yield positive results. Initially transformed into more powerless “de-escalation zones,” they did not contribute to actual de-escalation of the conflict, whether it was intra-Syrian or Kurdish-Turkish. Additionally, the United States used these zones for their own purposes, such as provoking the Assad government and its allies to engage in excessive retaliation.

## **3.2. Direct Military and Proxy War Actions of the Trump Administration Regarding Syrian Conflict**

### **3.2.1. Support for the “Moderate Opposition”: The End of Operation Timber Sycamore and Turkish Operations in Northern Syria**

In previous chapter it was demonstrated that the US's endorsement of the Syrian “moderate opposition” not only failed, but actually had the opposite effect. An investigation conducted by Conflict Armament Research in December 2017 found that the provision of weapons “significantly augmented the quantity and quality of weapons available to ISIS\*<sup>951</sup> forces,”<sup>952</sup> with the latest anti-tank missile systems falling into the hands of the jihadists “within two months of the weapon's dispatch from the factory.”<sup>953</sup> Furthermore, the outcomes of the Syrian Train and Equip Program were equally disheartening: the few units that were trained were quickly either defeated or surrendered to the jihadists.

It was then a reasonable decision for the Trump administration to reconsider its stance on these programs, particularly with regards to Operation Timber Sycamore. In fact, the operation underwent a comprehensive review. In July 2017, not long after Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin met on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Germany, The Washington Post reported, citing multiple U.S. officials, that the White House had made the decision to terminate a covert CIA operation that involved the provision and training of the Syrian “moderate opposition.” According to sources, this move was seen as a victory for Putin in Syria, and the “moderates” became increasingly vulnerable, though some saw it

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<sup>950</sup> Turkey cites disagreements with U.S. even as joint Syria patrols begin // Reuters. September 8, 2018. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-turkey-erdogan/turkey-cites-disagreements-with-u-s-even-as-joint-syria-patrols-begin-idUSKCN1VT0JI> (accessed: 03.04.2020)

<sup>951</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>952</sup> Weapons of the Islamic State\*. A three-year investigation in Iraq and Syria // Conflict Armament Research. December 2017. P. 8. URL: <https://www.conflictarm.com/reports/weapons-of-the-islamic-state/> \* (accessed: 20.03.2023)

<sup>953</sup> Ibid. P. 6.

as an acknowledgement of the obvious fact that Assad had essentially won the civil war<sup>954</sup>. Reuters also reported that fighters who underwent training under this program often defected to the Islamists, and Trump had even pledged to stop supporting FSA units prior to taking office<sup>955</sup>.

The Train and Equip Program underwent some revisions as well, though it was not entirely cancelled. In fact, at first, the program's costs even increased. For example, in 2016, the Obama administration requested \$250 million for the program, but in March 2017, the new administration requested an additional \$180 million, though only \$218 million was allocated. The following year, the Trump administration requested \$500 million for the Counter-ISIS<sup>956</sup> Train and Equip Fund (CTEF). In FY19, \$300 million was requested for CTEF, of which \$252 million was allocated. However, for 2020, only \$200 million out of the requested \$300 million was allocated. As a result, the White House tempered its ambitions and only requested \$200 million for FY2021<sup>957</sup>.

Under Donald Trump, the United States supported two main factions in Syria. The first one consisted of groups operating in the southeast of Syria in the Al-Tanf area, the largest of which was Jaish Maghaweir al-Thowra, formerly known as the New Syrian Army or the Army of the Commandos of the Revolution. It was their units that controlled the territory near the Rukban camp close to Al-Tanf base. However, according to the head of the Russian General Staff, Sergei Gerasimov, former Islamic State\* fighters were among this group and other US-controlled groups in Al-Tanf<sup>958</sup>.

The other faction consisted of groups in the north and northeast of the country, with the central group being the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which were comprised of approximately 80% Kurdish YPG fighters. The majority of American military assistance was directed towards these groups, which led to significant discontent in Türkiye. The Turkish government accused the Syrian Kurds of having connections with the Turkish Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is recognized as a terrorist organization not only in Türkiye but also in the United States. This put the United States in a difficult position because they needed to maintain the combat effectiveness of the SDF to continue using them to fight ISIS\* and to contain Iran<sup>959</sup>, but they could not risk completely alienating Türkiye, one of their most important NATO allies.

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<sup>954</sup> *Jaffe G., Entous A.* Trump ends covert CIA program to arm anti-Assad rebels in Syria, a move sought by Moscow // The Washington Post. July 19, 2017. URL: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-ends-covert-cia-program-to-arm-anti-assad-rebels-in-syria-a-move-sought-by-moscow/2017/07/19/b6821a62-6beb-11e7-96ab-5f38140b38cc\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-ends-covert-cia-program-to-arm-anti-assad-rebels-in-syria-a-move-sought-by-moscow/2017/07/19/b6821a62-6beb-11e7-96ab-5f38140b38cc_story.html) (accessed: 18.04.2020)

<sup>955</sup> Trump ends CIA arms support for anti-Assad Syria rebels: U.S. officials // Reuters. July 20, 2017. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-usa-syria-idUSKBN1A42KC> (accessed: 18.04.2020)

<sup>956</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>957</sup> *Humud C., Blanchard C.* Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response // Congressional Research Service. February 12, 2020. P. 27; *Humud C., Blanchard C., Nikitin M.B.* Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response // Congressional Research Service. March 25, 2019. P. 26-27.

<sup>958</sup> The General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces: the United States is preparing terrorists at its base at Al-Tanf in Syria (In Russ.) // TASS. December 27, 2017. URL: <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/4845692> (accessed: 19.04.2020)

<sup>959</sup> *Evseenko A.* US and Kurds... (In Russ.). URL: <https://rusus.jes.su/s207054760005315-3-1> (accessed: 05.03.2020)



In such a complicated situation, Washington was forced to make a choice, and unfortunately, it was not in favor of the Kurds. This is apparent in the American requests for funding for the training of “vetted Syrian opposition” (VSO) fighters. For instance, in FY2019, the plan was to maintain 35,000 members of the Internal Security Forces and 30,000 members of military formations, making a total of 65,000 people. The following year, this number decreased to 61,000, along with a reduction in direct training of fighters by American instructors.<sup>960</sup> For FY2021, the plan was to decrease the trained and equipped personnel in Syria to 10,000.<sup>961</sup>

It is also worth noting the Stop Arming Terrorists Act, proposed by Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard and Senator Rand Paul in January 2017. It had a catchy name, but its language was rather insignificant. The bill aimed to legally prohibit the arming of Al-Qaeda\*<sup>962</sup>, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham\*, and the Islamic State\*, which are organizations that the United States has never officially supplied. However, the bill failed to mention other smaller Syrian Islamist organizations. As a result, the bill had no real impact, and it was easily incorporated into the FY2020 National Defense Authorization Act.<sup>963</sup> The bill can be viewed as a measure lobbied by opponents of Qatar, which was accused of financing ISIS\* and Jabhat Fatah al-Sham\*, as it included retaliatory measures against countries engaged in such activities.

Furthermore, the United States has provided non-lethal aid to various Syrian opposition groups to help stabilize the areas under their control. However, according to researchers from the Congressional Research Service, the Trump administration's 2020 budget request indicated that it intended to terminate non-lethal aid to the Syrian opposition and transfer the responsibility for funding stabilization projects to Coalition partners.<sup>964</sup>

The situation underwent systematic changes throughout Trump's presidency. In early 2017, the Obama administration informed Congress that it would spend \$230 million to support the stabilization of Syria liberated from ISIS\* in FY2017. However, in August and September 2018, the new administration announced plans to reallocate these funds, with more significant contributions expected from foreign partners of the US. The FY2018 budget did not have any special allocation for Syria, but the RRF fund had \$500 million designated to support the territories liberated from ISIS\*, including Syria. In FY2019, the FY2019 Consolidated Appropriations Act allocated \$40 million for non-lethal aid to Syria, with at least \$7 million designated for medical assistance and investigating cases of chemical weapons use. Unlike the previous year, there was no clear list of objectives that the aid should achieve. By the end of 2019, \$4.5 million of these funds had been allocated to support the White Helmets.

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<sup>960</sup> Humud C., Blanchard C., Nikitin M.B. *Armed Conflict in Syria...* P. 27.

<sup>961</sup> Humud C., Blanchard C. *Armed Conflict in Syria...* P. 27-28.

<sup>962</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>963</sup> S. 1790. National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020. December 19, 2019. Sec. 1228. URL: <https://www.congress.gov/116/plaws/publ92/PLAW-116publ92.pdf> (accessed: 20.03.2023)

<sup>964</sup> Humud C., Blanchard C. *Armed Conflict in Syria...* P. 28.

Additionally, Syrian programs received \$130 million and \$44.5 million from the ESRF and NADR funds, respectively.

For FY2020, the Trump administration did not request any specific funding for Syria from the ESRF or NADR. However, the FY2020 Further Consolidated Appropriations Act allocated \$40 million for non-lethal stabilization in Syria, with an additional \$7 million designated for medical assistance and investigating cases of chemical weapons use.<sup>965</sup> In October 2019, Trump provided an extra \$50 million in assistance to stabilize Syria, but it is unclear from which fiscal year this funding would be allocated.<sup>966</sup> Again, no specific Syrian programs were planned for FY2021, and the situation was similar to 2018, except for a decrease in the required amount. This time, the RRF was only required to provide \$135 million instead of \$500 million. Additionally, the administration requested \$5.9 billion for the new organization “International Humanitarian Assistance,” which was meant to operate in Syria as well.<sup>967</sup>

After reviewing the given information, it can be concluded that the financial support provided by the United States to opposition and Kurdish groups in Syria during Trump's presidency decreased steadily. This reduction in funding could be attributed to two main factors. First, Trump aimed to shift the responsibility of funding these programs to Coalition partners, as he believed that the United States was spending an excessive amount of budgetary funds on these programs. Second, funding items, such as assistance to the Syrian Kurds, were cut to avoid damaging the relationship with Türkiye.

### **3.2.2. Completion of the Second (January 2017-December 2018) and Transition to the Third (January 2019-January 2021) Phase of Operation Inherent Resolve in Syria. Failures of Russian-American Cooperation and the Battle of Raqqa**

One of the key objectives of Donald Trump's Middle Eastern policy, if not his entire foreign policy agenda during his presidential campaign, was to achieve the “enduring defeat of ISIS\*<sup>968</sup>.” Trump sought to portray himself as the sole candidate capable of effectively dealing with this organization that poses a global threat. For that purpose, he accused both his predecessor, President Barack Obama, and his opponent in the upcoming election, Hillary Clinton, of literally creating the Islamic State\*.<sup>969</sup>

As mentioned in Chapter 1, Trump had expressed his willingness to collaborate with Russia towards the goal of defeating ISIS\*, and did not see the need to allocate valuable resources to confront the Assad regime, which was also fighting against the terrorist group. This approach was received very positively in Moscow, with talks about the potential of creating a coalition between the United States and Russia

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<sup>965</sup> Ibid. P. 29-30.

<sup>966</sup> Statement from the Press Secretary // The White House. October 12, 2019. URL: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-press-secretary-88/> (accessed: 17.04.2020)

<sup>967</sup> Humud C., Blanchard C. *Armed Conflict in Syria*... P. 30.

<sup>968</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>969</sup> Media: Trump called Obama the “founder of ISIS\*” (In Russ.) // TASS. August 11, 2016. URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/3528267> (accessed: 22.04.2020)

in Syria at the highest levels.<sup>970</sup> However, these optimistic hopes and predictions ultimately failed to materialize.

Initially, there was reason to believe that the cooperation between the Kremlin and the White House on Syria could be taken to a whole new level. On January 22, 2017, the Russian Ministry of Defense reported that Russian military pilots had targeted locations whose coordinates were provided by the American side. While the Pentagon did not confirm this claim, Russian experts saw this as a potential first step in a joint effort between the US and Russia against ISIS\*<sup>971, 972</sup>. On February 2, The Washington Post published an article stating that the Trump administration had rejected the plan to attack the Syrian city of Raqqa, the self-proclaimed capital of the self-proclaimed caliphate that was proposed by the previous administration, partly because it did not include coordination with Russia and also because it was deemed “too gradual.”<sup>973</sup>

However, the events of April 4 in Khan Sheikhoun erased all the possibilities mentioned earlier. Furthermore, the American downing of a Syrian Su-22 plane on June 18, 2017 added fuel to the fire and prompted the Russian Defense Ministry to announce a temporary halt to a joint agreement with the United States to ensure flight safety. The Americans accused the Syrians of attacking the positions of the Syrian Democratic Forces, while the Syrian government claimed that the strike was carried out on the positions of the Islamic State\*. Most likely, due to the inconsistent actions of the parties involved, the Syrian pilots were not aware that the Kurds had already ousted the jihadists from the positions. Nonetheless, both sides used this incident to reinforce their positions: some claimed that the Syrian government was bombing the “moderate opposition,” while others argued that the US was hindering those who were genuinely fighting the ISIS\*.

In the meantime, even though the White House had declined the previous administration's plan to attack Raqqa, preparations for its recapture were underway. Taking control of a major city held by the Islamic State\* was crucial to enhancing the Global Coalition's reputation, especially following the less successful Mosul operation. However, the major challenge was determining which units should be involved in the assault. The SDF were initially designated, but the US aimed to engage Turkish units as well. Additionally, President Erdogan had previously suggested employing the Turkish army in operations near Raqqa, but Obama had preferred the involvement of the Kurds.

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<sup>970</sup> Slutsky: Russia and the United States can form a coalition in Syria (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. January 29, 2017. URL: <https://ria.ru/20170129/1486708450.html> (accessed: 22.04.2020)

<sup>971</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>972</sup> Experts: Russian-U.S. cooperation on Syria will speed up conflict resolution (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. January 24, 2017. URL: <https://ria.ru/20170124/1486344306.html> (accessed: 22.04.2020)

<sup>973</sup> Entous A., Jaffe G., Ryan M. Obama's White House worked for months on a plan to seize Raqqa. Trump's team took a brief look and decided not to pull the trigger // The Washington Post. February 2, 2017. URL: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obamas-white-house-worked-for-months-on-a-plan-to-seize-raqqa-trumps-team-deemed-it-hopelessly-inadequate/2017/02/02/116310fa-e71a-11e6-80c2-30e57e57e05d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obamas-white-house-worked-for-months-on-a-plan-to-seize-raqqa-trumps-team-deemed-it-hopelessly-inadequate/2017/02/02/116310fa-e71a-11e6-80c2-30e57e57e05d_story.html) (accessed: 22.04.2020)

Under the Trump administration, the United States attempted to balance between its two allies, who were also sworn enemies of each other. In mid-February, John McCain, the head of the Senate Armed Services Committee, visited northern Syria and Türkiye, seemingly engaging in shuttle diplomacy.<sup>974</sup> Subsequently, negotiations with Türkiye about its possible involvement in the liberation of Raqqa were confirmed by the commander of Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR), Stephen Townsend.<sup>975</sup> However, this plan fell through once again because Ankara refused to budge and demanded a complete cessation of support for the Syrian Kurds. Consequently, the American command decided to rely on the SDF but to focus more on the Arab formations within the alliance. This decision was made because Raqqa was predominantly inhabited by Arabs who were wary of the People's Protection Units (YPG), which had expanded beyond their area of residence and had somewhat vague motives and political ambitions.<sup>976</sup>

The Battle of Raqqa, which marked the final stage of Operation Wrath of the Euphrates, began on June 6, 2017. The SDF were not alone in the fight, as they received continuous support from the US-led Coalition air forces. In addition, up to 500 American troops from special forces, along with British and French special forces, provided direct ground support. By June 24, the city was completely surrounded, and by mid-July, almost half of the city had been cleansed. The historical center was liberated in early September, and on October 17, the last center of resistance in Raqqa was captured.

However, it is crucial to note the significant violations that occurred during the liberation of Raqqa. According to the report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria, all parties involved committed massive violations, which had devastating consequences for the civilian population<sup>977</sup>. The SDF even recruited boys as young as 13 years old, and Western air strikes hit a school where the Coalition claimed there were up to 30 ISIS\*<sup>978</sup> fighters, but it was later discovered that they were not there.<sup>979</sup> Furthermore, there were many similar incidents that were not included in the commission's report. However, the US-led Coalition rejected these accusations, even those confirmed by UN representatives.<sup>980</sup>

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<sup>974</sup> *Nissenbaum D.* John McCain Makes Secret Trip to Syria in Midst of U.S. Assessment // The Wall Street Journal. February 22, 2017. URL: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/mccain-makes-secret-trip-to-syria-in-midst-of-u-s-assessment-1487795458> (accessed: 23.04.2020)

<sup>975</sup> Department of Defense Press Briefing by Gen. Townsend via teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq // U.S. Department of Defense. March 1, 2017. URL: <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/1099469/departement-of-defense-press-briefing-by-gen-townsend-via-teleconference-from-ba/> (accessed: 23.04.2020)

<sup>976</sup> Kurds, together with the United States, are preparing Arab militias to storm Raqqa (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. March 21, 2017. URL: <https://ria.ru/20170321/1490469166.html> (accessed: 23.04.2020)

<sup>977</sup> Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (A/HRC/37/72). United Nations Human Right Council, Thirty-seventh session. February 1, 2018. P. 10-11. URL: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G18/022/82/PDF/G1802282.pdf> (accessed: 04.04.2023)

<sup>978</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>979</sup> Report of the Independent International... P. 11-12.

<sup>980</sup> US coalition denies 150 deaths in strike near Raqqa (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. March 7, 2018. URL: <https://ria.ru/20180307/1515955987.html> (accessed: 24.04.2020)

As of 2022, Raqqa remained largely destroyed. Despite being one of the largest cities in Syria and under the control of the SDF, the Western coalition has shown no interest in rebuilding the city. In fact, in 2018, the Trump administration stopped allocating funds for the reconstruction of northwestern Syria, including Raqqa<sup>981</sup>. The revenue generated from the Syrian oil fields, which are also controlled by the SDF, was not used for the city's reconstruction either<sup>982</sup>. This dire situation has been reported not only by Syrian publications but also by Western media outlets such as USA Today<sup>983</sup> and The Guardian<sup>984</sup>. These reports highlight the plight of the remaining 30,000 residents of Raqqa, who were liberated from ISIS\*<sup>985</sup> but continue to suffer from the lack of basic infrastructure and services. It is worth noting that before the war, the population of Raqqa was around 300,000.

Another significant issue to report is the United States' approach towards the surrounded jihadist groups of ISIS\*, which highlighted the double standards employed by both parties of the conflict. In August 2017, a group of ISIS\* fighters along with their families was trapped on the Syrian-Lebanese border. They were given a safe passage to the city of Abu Kemal in the Deir-ez-Zor governorate, on the border with Iraq, after they provided information about the captured Lebanese military personnel and Hezbollah fighters. However, the United States disagreed with this deal and took action that prevented the column from moving west<sup>986</sup>.

Meanwhile, the media repeatedly shared information about how the Americans transported ISIS\* commanders by helicopter to the territory under their control, where they joined the ranks of pro-American groups, including the SDF. For instance, about 20 ISIS\* leaders with their families were deported from the settlements of Treif and Abu Leyl in August 2017 (which coincided with the Coalition's official criticism of the Syrian and Lebanese sides), as well as from the Mayadeen area in November and from the northern regions of Deir-ez-Zor in December 2017<sup>987</sup>. Additionally, one could also examine the events in Raqqa and remember about the convoy of 250 ISIS\* fighters and approximately 3,500 members of their families, which was freely released by the American coalition forces from the city<sup>988</sup>.

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<sup>981</sup> Trump administration ends aid for northwestern Syria // CBS News. May 18, 2018. URL:

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-administration-ends-aid-for-northwestern-syria/> (accessed: 25.03.2023)

<sup>982</sup> Residents of Syrian Raqqa spoke about life in the destroyed city (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. February 18, 2020. URL: <https://ria.ru/20200218/1564904516.html> (accessed: 24.04.2020)

<sup>983</sup> Huang M. US-led coalition airstrikes destroyed Raqqa. I met the women we've abandoned there // USA Today. June 5, 2019. URL: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/voices/2019/06/05/war-syria-us-coalition-raqqa-civilians-column/1329185001/> (accessed: 24.04.2020)

<sup>984</sup> Allen K. Raqqa is in ruins like a modern Dresden. This is not 'precision bombing' // The Guardian. May 23, 2019. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/may/23/raqqa-ruins-bombing> (accessed: 24.04.2020)

<sup>985</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>986</sup> Nordland R. U.S. Airstrikes Block Convoy Transferring ISIS\* Fighters // The New York Times. August 30, 2017. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/30/world/middleeast/isis-syria-lebanon-us-military.html> (accessed: 23.04.2020)

<sup>987</sup> US helicopters evacuate militant leaders from Deir ez-Zor (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. December 29, 2017. URL: <https://ria.ru/20171229/1511988043.html> (accessed: 24.04.2020)

<sup>988</sup> BBC reveals secret deal to evacuate hundreds of IS fighters from Raqqa (In Russ.) // TASS. November 14, 2017. URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/4726724> (accessed: 17.07.2023)

Following the conclusion of the Battle of Raqqa, the fight against ISIS\*<sup>989</sup> continued. The SDF, supported by airstrikes and the special forces of Coalition, carried on with the clearance of the remaining small pockets of the Caliphate that existed on the eastern bank of the Euphrates. However, all major resistance groups were eliminated. As early as December 2017, statements were made in the United States about the triumph over ISIS\*, which was credited to the US-led coalition, while Syria and Russia were criticized for not showing a serious approach or commitment to defeating ISIS\*, according to Washington<sup>990</sup>. In due course, Donald Trump himself made similar comments, claiming that the United States had won in Syria and that his administration had made more progress against ISIS\* in eight months than the previous administration had during its entire term<sup>991</sup>. A year later, Trump declared the defeat of ISIS\* and consequently announced the withdrawal of troops from Syria<sup>992</sup>.

Nonetheless, this withdrawal was delayed for various reasons, which will be analyzed in the corresponding section concerning the dynamics of the US military presence in Syria. Furthermore, it is important to note that the fight against ISIS\* was not truly over at that time, as fighting persisted in the province of Deir-ez-Zor. Additionally, the liberation of the entire territory formerly occupied by ISIS\* did not guarantee its complete destruction; the organization survived and resorted to guerrilla warfare tactics. Even the operation to eliminate Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in October 2019 did not lead to the ultimate defeat of the group. In January 2017, Rex Tillerson was correct when he emphasized the necessity of winning the “war of ideas” and dismantling the very concept of a Caliphate. Although ISIS\* leaders could be killed one by one, new individuals would arise to take their place until the underlying reasons behind the appeal of the Caliphate to many Muslims were addressed.

### **3.2.3. The U.S. and Chemical Attacks in Syria in 2017-2018**

Nonetheless, the missile strikes conducted in Syria were not solely directed towards the IS terrorists but also targeted those who had fought against them. Specifically, these strikes were directed towards Syrian military and governmental establishments, in connection to the suspected chemical attacks that took place in April of 2017 and 2018. There are still numerous contentious issues surrounding this topic, such as the legality of the actions taken by the US and the culpability of the Assad government for orchestrating the chemical attacks, as well as whether or not these attacks actually occurred.

Firstly, it is important to retrace the events that took place during that period. On April 4, 2017, the first chemical attack took place in the town of Khan Sheikhoun in Idlib governorate. The volunteers of

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<sup>989</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>990</sup> The Pentagon called the liberation of Syria the merit of the coalition, not Russia (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. December 5, 2017. URL: <https://ria.ru/20171205/1510199626.html> (accessed: 24.04.2020)

<sup>991</sup> Remarks by President Trump at Signing of H.R. 2810, National Defense Authorization Act for FY2018 // The White House. December 12, 2017. URL: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-signing-h-r-2810-national-defense-authorization-act-fy2018/> (accessed: 24.04.2020)

<sup>992</sup> Trump orders US troops to leave Syria as White House declares victory over ISIS\* // ABC News. December 20, 2018. URL: <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-announce-us-withdraw-troops-syria-official/story?id=59906876> (accessed: 24.04.2020)

the notorious White Helmets, who voluntarily rescued civilians and who were allegedly targeted by Syrian pilots during bombings, were the first to report this attack. Later that day, the State Department held a briefing on the fight against the Islamic State<sup>993</sup>, but the issue of chemical attacks could not be ignored either. A high-ranking official avoided answering questions about the newly emerging problem, but strongly hinted that Syria, Russia, and Iran, who had acted as guarantors of the truce concluded in Astana but failed to keep their promises, were behind the attack<sup>994</sup>. On that same day, President Trump personally accused Assad of being responsible for the attack<sup>995</sup>. A couple of days later, he told the press that “something should happen,” indicating that he was likely to take a different approach than his predecessor who failed to take action when his own “red line” was crossed four years earlier<sup>996</sup>. In the early morning of April 7, two American destroyers launched 60 Tomahawk missiles, with 59 of them hitting the Syrian Air Force base at Shayrat, which was allegedly the place where the plane that dropped the poisonous substance took off.

The second occurrence of the use of chemical weapons in Syria took place precisely one year after the Shayrat attack, on April 7, 2018, in the town of Douma near Damascus. The White Helmets were once again the first to report the incident, and Western countries, led by the United States, immediately accused the Syrian government of being responsible, and Russia and Iran of supporting these actions. The timing of the military response was somewhat delayed compared to the previous year's incident, possibly due to the multilateral response. However, on the night of April 13-14, 105 missiles were launched by the US, UK, and France, targeting Syrian facilities involved in the production and storage of chemical weapons.

At first glance, the chain of events may seem straightforward from the American perspective. The Assad regime, not bound by any significant obligations, felt emboldened by the support of powerful external forces and, in typical “Asian style,” used its formidable arsenal to crush the opposition's will to resist. However, a closer examination of this narrative raises several questions that cast doubt on its validity.

Firstly, it is unclear why Assad would have specifically needed to carry out these chemical attacks. Even if one assumes the possibility that Damascus had hidden some chemical weapons from being handed over in 2013-2014, their use in 2017 and 2018 appears to make no sense. By this time, Assad's victory in the civil war was already evident, with only small pockets of opposition fighters and jihadists remaining. These areas were successfully cleared by government and pro-government forces without the

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<sup>993</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>994</sup> Background Briefing on the Effort To Defeat ISIS\* // U.S. Department of State. April 4, 2017. URL: <https://www.state.gov/background-briefing-on-the-effort-to-defeat-isis/> (accessed: 29.04.2020)

<sup>995</sup> Statement from President Donald J. Trump // The White House. April 4, 2017. URL:

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-donald-j-trump-3/> (accessed: 29.04.2020)

<sup>996</sup> Trump on Syria's Assad: 'Something should happen' // CNN. April 7, 2017. URL:

<https://edition.cnn.com/2017/04/06/politics/donald-trump-syria-options/index.html> (accessed: 29.04.2020)

use of chemical weapons, which would have inevitably led to significant reputational damage. This would not have been in Assad's interests, as he was seeking to rebuild his reputation. Even some researchers who generally agree with the Western narrative struggle to understand the motives behind why the Syrian government would have allegedly taken such actions.<sup>997</sup> While one may believe the claims of American analysts that Assad simply wanted to eliminate anyone in the territories not under his control.<sup>998</sup>, or that the military gains from using chemical weapons outweighed the associated political risks.<sup>999</sup>, such assumptions appear unfounded.

Another interesting observation is the coincidence of events that occurred just before the alleged chemical attacks. On March 30, 2017, US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley announced that the US would no longer prioritize the overthrow of Assad as a policy goal.<sup>1000</sup> Secretary of State Rex Tillerson also stated that the Syrian people should determine the status of Bashar al Assad.<sup>1001</sup> The following day, White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer called this a recognition of “political reality.”<sup>1002</sup> However, just five days later, the alleged chemical attack in Khan Sheikhoun took place, accompanied by powerful images of dead Syrian children, which compelled Washington to react in a completely opposite way.<sup>1003</sup>

In 2018, a similar coincidence occurred. On March 29, President Trump announced that the United States should leave Syria, which surprised the State Department, Pentagon, and Congress, all of which opposed the decision.<sup>1004</sup> Just a week later, a chemical attack occurred in Syria, which appeared to be a clear demonstration that US involvement in Syria was far from over and that the limits of intervention had not yet been reached. American authors have noted similar coincidences.<sup>1005</sup> However, this did not significantly impact Trump's plans as White House press secretary Sarah Sanders noted on April 16 that the president was still committed to bringing American troops home.<sup>1006</sup>

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<sup>997</sup> *Bollfrass A.* Syria: Stumbling into stalemate / *Sisson M., Siebens J., Blechman B. (eds.)*. Military Coercion and US Foreign Policy. Routledge, 2020. P. 58-59.

<sup>998</sup> *Jenkins M.B.* Why Would Assad Use Chemical Weapons? // RAND. April 14, 2017. URL: <https://www.rand.org/blog/2017/04/why-would-assad-use-chemical-weapons.html> (accessed: 30.04.2020)

<sup>999</sup> *Danin R.* President Trump's Syria Strikes Are Not About Syria // Council on Foreign Relations. April 16, 2018. URL: <https://www.cfr.org/blog/president-trumps-syria-strikes-are-not-about-syria> (accessed: 30.04.2020)

<sup>1000</sup> U.S. priority on Syria no longer focused on 'getting Assad out': Haley // Reuters. March 31, 2017. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-usa-haley-idUSKBN1712QL> (accessed: 30.04.2020)

<sup>1001</sup> Press Availability With Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu // U.S. Department of State. March 30, 2017. URL: <https://www.state.gov/press-availability-with-turkish-foreign-minister-mevlut-cavusoglu-2/> (accessed: 30.04.2020)

<sup>1002</sup> Syria: Sean Spicer says U.S. must accept «political reality» // CBS News. March 31, 2017. URL: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/syria-sean-spicer-says-u-s-must-accept-political-reality/> (accessed: 30.04.2020)

<sup>1003</sup> *Berents H.* Politics, policy-making and the presence of images of suffering children // *International Affairs*. 2020, Vol. 96, No. 3. P. 593-608. DOI: 10.1093/ia/iiz275

<sup>1004</sup> Trump tells advisers he wants U.S. out of Syria: senior officials // Reuters. March 30, 2018. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-syria-idUSKBN1H61J0> (accessed: 30.04.2020)

<sup>1005</sup> *Jenkins P.* War and Happiness: The Role of Temperament in the Assessment of Resolve. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. P. 319-320. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-030-14078-6

<sup>1006</sup> Press Gaggle by Press Secretary Sarah Sanders // The White House. April 16, 2018. URL: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/press-gaggle-by-press-secretary-sarah-sanders-041618/> (accessed: 30.04.2020)



However, it is worth considering that the airstrikes launched by President Trump and turned into a “big show”<sup>1007</sup> could also have served to benefit him politically. By taking a seemingly tougher stance on Syria, Russia, and Iran than his predecessor Barack Obama, Trump was able to strengthen his position and present himself as a stronger leader. Following the 2017 strike, Trump's approval rating increased by 8 points from 34% to 42%, demonstrating the positive impact this type of action can have on a president's popularity<sup>1008</sup>. However, it is important to note that public opinion regarding these strikes was divided, with approximately half of Americans supporting them in both 2017 and 2018., as mentioned in Chapter 1.

The Congress had a somewhat different stance on Trump's decisions. While some congressmen partially supported them, the others criticized him for being reckless and potentially dragging the US into a war with Syria, Russia, and Iran<sup>1009</sup>. They were especially concerned about the unconstitutionality of his actions. The State Department and the Pentagon argued that the President had the right to take such actions under Article II of the US Constitution and the 2001 AUMF resolution. However, this prompted Congress to revisit the issue of legislative regulation of US military operations in Syria. On April 16, 2018, Bob Corker, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, introduced a new resolution to Congress, which gave the President the right to use military force against ISIS\*<sup>1010</sup>, Al-Qaeda\*, and other terrorist organizations. This resolution had two crucial features – it nullified similar resolutions of 2001 and 2002 and provided for regular discussions in Congress about the powers granted by this joint resolution<sup>1011</sup>. Thus, this resolution continued the trend of limiting the President's powers by Congress, although it was never adopted.

The United States has been also using international organizations to advance its interests as well. In regards to the culpability of the Assad government in all chemical attacks, the US has taken a consistent stance. As early as February 28, 2017, at a UNSC meeting, the West attempted to pass a resolution directly accusing the Syrian government of using chemical weapons, which was blocked by Russia and China<sup>1012</sup>. US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley responded to their doubts about the activities of the

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<sup>1007</sup> Macdonald P. America First? Explaining Continuity and Change in Trump’s Foreign Policy // Political Science Quarterly. 2018. Vol. 133, No. 3. P. 434. DOI :10.1002/polq.12804

<sup>1008</sup> What Americans think about U.S. strike on Syria // CBS News. April 10, 2017. URL: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/cbs-news-poll-shows-divergence-in-americans-opinion-of-us-strike-vs-syria/> (accessed: 30.04.2020)

<sup>1009</sup> American Senate told how the drawing into Syrian war threatened the US (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. April 14, 2018. URL: <https://ria.ru/20180414/1518625347.html> (accessed: 01.05.2020)

<sup>1010</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>1011</sup> S.J.Res. 59. Authorization for Use of Military Force of 2018. April 16, 2018. Sec. 2. URL: <https://www.congress.gov/115/bills/sjres59/BILLS-115sjres59is.pdf> (accessed: 20.03.2023)

<sup>1012</sup> Albania, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Montenegro, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Qatar, Romania, Saudi Arabia, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, Ukraine, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and United States of America: draft resolution (S/2017/172). February 28, 2017. URL: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N17/053/55/pdf/N1705355.pdf> (accessed: 24.03.2023)

UN-OPCW Joint Investigation Mechanism, established in accordance with UNSCR 2235 in August 2015.<sup>1013</sup>, by stating that “the problem is not with the investigation,” and that Russia and China simply didn't like the results of the investigation. Haley also emphasized the suffering of innocent people who died as a result of chemical attacks, using emotional appeals in nearly every paragraph.<sup>1014</sup>

The demagogic techniques used by Ambassador Haley in her speeches were similar. In April 2017, she started her speech with the story of a Syrian who lost his two nine-month-old twins during the attack on Khan Sheikhoun.<sup>1015</sup> A year later, when no suitable story was found, she resorted to emotional and loud expressions such as “the moment of truth has come,” “Russia has mixed the authority of the Council with the dirt,” and “barbaric attacks.”<sup>1016</sup> In her statements, like those of most Western officials, the Assad government was always called the culprit of what happened, even in absentia. This raises questions about the neutrality and objectivity of the investigations proposed by Washington.

Another interesting episode happened in May 2018, when Syria was scheduled to chair the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva for a month, following all the established rules. However, the United States made a demarche by criticizing the decision. The American representative, Robert Wood, labeled the event a “theatrical show” and vowed to prevent Syria from pursuing initiatives that conflict with US interests.<sup>1017</sup> This stance was supported by Nikki Haley, who asserted that the Assad regime lacked the “moral right” to chair the conference.<sup>1018</sup>

The validity of chemical attacks has also been disputed, as evidenced by the Russian government's statements regarding the incidents in Khan Sheikhoun and Douma. In the case of Khan Sheikhoun, Russia claims that while Syrian aircraft did strike the area, it did not use toxic substances, but instead hit the shops where militants were producing chemical weapons.<sup>1019</sup> Similarly, the Russian Ministry of Defense announced a day prior to the Douma incident that an imminent provocation involving chemical

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<sup>1013</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 2235 (S/RES/2235). August 7, 2015. URL: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N15/248/88/PDF/N1524888.pdf> (accessed: 24.03.2023)

<sup>1014</sup> Explanation of Vote on a Draft UN Security Council Resolution on Syria Chemical Weapons // U.S. Embassy in Syria. February 28, 2017. URL: <https://sy.usembassy.gov/explanation-vote-draft-un-security-council-resolution-syria-chemical-weapons/> (accessed: 08.04.2020)

<sup>1015</sup> 7922nd Meeting. Provisional // United Nations Security Council. April 12, 2017. P. 12. URL: [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s\\_pv\\_7922.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_pv_7922.pdf) (accessed: 20.03.2023)

<sup>1016</sup> 8228<sup>th</sup> Meeting. Provisional // United Nations Security Council. April 10, 2018. P. 11. URL: [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s\\_pv\\_8228.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_pv_8228.pdf) (accessed: 20.03.2023)

<sup>1017</sup> US promises to 'obstruct' Syrian presidency of the Conference on Disarmament (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. May 29, 2018. URL: <https://ria.ru/20180529/1521587863.html> (accessed: 10.04.2020)

<sup>1018</sup> Amb Haley on Syria Assuming the Presidency of the Conference on Disarmament // U.S. Embassy in Syria. May 29, 2018. URL: <https://sy.usembassy.gov/amb-haley-on-syria-assuming-the-presidency-of-the-conference-on-disarmament/> (accessed: 10.04.2020)

<sup>1019</sup> Russian Defense Ministry: Syrian aircraft bombed chemical weapons production shops in Khan Sheikhoun (In Russ.) // TASS. April 5, 2017. URL: <https://tass.ru/politika/4154524> (accessed: 01.05.2020)

weapons was planned<sup>1020</sup>. Subsequently, evidence supporting the Russian version began to emerge in the West. For instance, BBC Syria producer Riam Dalati confirmed the occurrence of an attack, but denied the use of sarin gas, and claimed that the White Helmets video was a complete fabrication<sup>1021</sup>.

The factor of international organizations, this time specifically the OPCW, intervened then. The most noteworthy event occurred as a result of the publication of the OPCW report in March 2019 regarding the Douma incident in April 2018. Six months after the investigation, WikiLeaks disclosed internal documents from the OPCW which revealed the report's preparation process<sup>1022</sup>. The documents disclosed numerous facts that suggest a possible absence of a chemical attack in Douma. These facts were outlined in the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission's (FFM) preliminary report.

However, even before the release of the OPCW's report, the first document of its kind was obtained by journalists. The document, authored by one of the OPCW experts, Ian Henderson, who was part of the FFM, stated that based on his examination, the containers supposedly holding chemical weapons were not dropped from the air. Instead, they were likely placed there intentionally by other means<sup>1023</sup>. Strangely, the official OPCW report did not include this finding. However, the report did refer to independent experts multiple times, who supported the American version of events.

The climax of the events was the release of OPCW documents by WikiLeaks, as previously mentioned. These documents confirmed that the containers were not dropped from the air, and also revealed that the presence of chemical weapons at the scene could not be established, not only within these containers, but in general. Only a small amount of active chlorine particles was detected, which could have come from anything, including household bleach. Additionally, there was a discrepancy between the symptoms observed in people allegedly affected by chemical weapons and those of chlorine poisoning<sup>1024</sup>.

However, all the information mentioned above was excluded from the final report. Correspondence between FFM members and their superiors, as well as the highest officials of the OPCW, indicated that they were under significant pressure. This pressure was indirectly acknowledged by the head of the Joint Investigative Mechanism, Edmond Mulet<sup>1025</sup>. As a result, facts that did not align with the Western version of events were suppressed. Initially, inspectors who worked in Douma were not permitted to

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<sup>1020</sup> Russian Defense Ministry: Jabhat al-Nusra\* and the Syrian Free Army are planning chemical attacks in Syria (In Russ.) // TASS. April 6, 2018. URL: <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/5101731> (accessed: 01.05.2020) (with \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked)

<sup>1021</sup> The BBC told about staged filming after the “chemical attack” in Syria (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. February 14, 2019. 14 февраля. URL: <https://ria.ru/20190214/1550825478.html> (accessed: 01.05.2020)

<sup>1022</sup> OPCW Douma Docs // WikiLeaks. URL: <https://wikileaks.org/opcw-douma/releases/> (accessed: 10.04.2020)

<sup>1023</sup> “A blow to reputation”: how an internal document of the OPCW casts doubt on the organization's statements about a chemical attack in Syria (In Russ.) // RT in Russian. May 20, 2019. URL: <https://russian.rt.com/world/article/632956-ozho-doklad-duma-siriya-utechka-himoruzhie> (accessed: 01.05.2020)

<sup>1024</sup> OPCW Douma Docs... URL: <https://wikileaks.org/opcw-douma/releases/> (accessed: 01.05.2020)

<sup>1025</sup> *Koblentz G.* Chemical-weapon use in Syria: atrocities, attribution, and accountability // *The Nonproliferation Review*. 2019, Vol. 26, No. 5-6. P. 590. DOI: 10.1080/10736700.2019.1718336

continue their work on the report after the publication of the preliminary version. The final report was produced by some “FFM core team,” consisting of only one person who was present in Douma, while the rest were based in a country designated as “X” (which is most likely Türkiye).

Secondly, Ian Henderson, an expert who authored one of the first leaked documents that reported damage to the tank where the alleged poisonous substance was located, was indeed a member of the FFM. However, he was suspended from work without explanation, despite multiple attempts to prove otherwise.

Thirdly, even before the dismissal of FFM members, the OPCW management repeatedly urged them to manipulate the language used in the report to divert attention from the possibility that there was no chemical attack. Following their dismissal, the “FFM core team” not only emphasized certain details differently and omitted certain facts but also completely removed entire sections from the report. For example, the epidemiological section, which highlighted the inconsistency between the reported symptoms and those observed during chlorine poisoning, was entirely excluded.

It is natural to wonder who could have exerted such strong pressure on the OPCW. The United States appears to be the most likely candidate for several reasons. Firstly, the final report produced by the “FFM core team” aligns with the US position that only the Assad regime is responsible for the chemical attacks in Syria. Secondly, the US is the largest contributor to the OPCW, providing almost a quarter of the total amount, and when combined with other Western countries, this amount exceeds half<sup>1026</sup>. This financial leverage gives the US a powerful tool to influence the organization's decisions.

On analyzing the plot, we can draw a conclusion based on the “cui prodest” principle. In essence, the results indicate that the Assad government was not responsible for the chemical attacks. There were no significant tactical gains resulting from the attacks, and the government suffered a severe reputational blow. Meanwhile, Donald Trump's ratings improved, and Congress attempted to curtail the President's powers. The American people also received further proof of their country's power, while the “Assad regime” once again became a “chemical scarecrow.” It is unclear whether the Syrian “moderate opposition” orchestrated the provocations with or without American involvement. However, the United States was the main beneficiary of these events.

#### **3.2.4. Dynamics of the U.S. Military Presence in Syria**

The US military presence in Syria is a critical aspect of Trump's policy towards this country, as it raises questions about its objectives, legality, and impact. By being physically present in Syria, the US military could exert greater influence on the situation there, such as by training local fighters, securing strategic locations, and justifying the protection of its personnel.

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<sup>1026</sup> Decision: Scale of Assessments for 2019 // OPCW. November 20, 2018. URL: <https://www.opcw.org/sites/default/files/documents/2018/11/c23dec14%28e%29.pdf> (accessed: 10.04.2020)

The exact number of US soldiers present in Syria when Donald Trump assumed the presidency remains uncertain. According to the Force Management Level (FML) in December 2016, up to 503 American troops were authorized to be stationed in Syria. However, this official figure did not provide a complete picture of the situation on the ground. Pentagon officials acknowledged that the number did not include temporarily deployed units or formations, which were not uncommon in Syria.<sup>1027</sup> Therefore, the actual number of American soldiers in Syria at that time was likely higher than the FML figure.

Moreover, many in Washington felt that the level of US military presence in Syria at the time was insufficient. In early February 2017, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Paul Ryan, expressed his support for sending an additional military contingent to Syria.<sup>1028</sup> Later that month, the Pentagon also discussed the need to deploy regular army units to Syria, as only small groups of US Special Forces were present in the country at that time.<sup>1029</sup> Initially, these proposals appeared to align with President Donald Trump's approach, as one of his main campaign promises was to defeat ISIS\* quickly, even if it meant temporarily abandoning another administration's commitment to reduce US activity in the Middle East. As a result, 400 US Marines from the 1st Battalion, 4th USMC Regiment were dispatched to Syria, although their main role was to provide artillery support for the SDF units during the upcoming Raqqa offensive rather than direct involvement in hostilities.<sup>1030</sup> In any case, the number of American troops in Syria increased to a minimum of 900 personnel.

In July 2017, the Turkish Anadolu news agency released the first detailed information about the American military presence in Syria. This occurred amid strained relations between Türkiye and the United States following President Trump's approval of weapons supply to the Syrian Kurds. Anadolu published data on the locations of American bases in the territories controlled by the SDF. According to the report, the first US airbases in the region were established near the city of Rumeilan in the Al-Hasakah governorate in 2015. Another base was added near Ain al-Arab (also known as Kobani) in the Aleppo governorate in 2016. These bases served as transit points for supplying weapons to the Syrian Kurdish armed groups. Moreover, there were military bases dedicated solely to the fight against ISIS\* in Syria. Three such bases were located in the Al-Hasakah governorate, another three in the north of the Raqqa governorate, and two more in the city of Manbij in the Aleppo governorate. The size of the American contingent was not disclosed in detail. The report only mentioned that one base in Al-Hasakah

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<sup>1027</sup> Humud C., Blanchard C., Nikitin M.B. Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response // Congressional Research Service. September 21, 2018. P. 33.

<sup>1028</sup> Riley M. Ryan Doesn't Rule Out Troops in Syria to Fight Islamic State\* // Bloomberg. February 5, 2017. URL: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-02-05/ryan-doesn-t-rule-out-troops-in-syria-to-fight-islamic-state> (accessed: 03.05.2020) (with \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.)

<sup>1029</sup> Pentagon might propose sending ground troops to Syria // CNN. February 15, 2017. URL: <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/02/15/politics/pentagon-considering-recommending-combat-troops-in-syria/> (accessed: 03.05.2020)

<sup>1030</sup> Lamothe D., Gibbons-Neff T. Marines have arrived in Syria to fire artillery in the fight for Raqqa // The Washington Post. March 9, 2017. URL: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/03/08/marines-have-arrived-in-syria-to-fire-artillery-in-the-fight-for-raqqa/> (accessed: 03.05.2020)

housed about 100 American soldiers, while another base had approximately 150 personnel. French soldiers were present alongside the Americans at two of the three bases in Raqqa, while the third base functioned as a communications center for the Coalition forces and as a base for operations targeting jihadists' communications.<sup>1031</sup> However, the Anadolu report did not mention the Al-Tanf base in the southwest of the Homs governorate, another US military installation in Syria.

It is noteworthy that the presence of two American bases in Manbij reflects the conflicting interests between the United States and Türkiye in Syria. Manbij was freed from ISIS\*<sup>1032</sup> militants by Syrian Kurds in the summer of 2016. This fact caused further irritation for Ankara, as the town was located far to the west of Syria and very close to the Turkish border. The Turks began threatening the Kurds to remove them from the area. In addition, the Russian military began patrolling the Manbij region to prevent it from falling under Turkish control. In March 2017, the United States decided to send about a hundred rangers with armored vehicles to the town, who openly wore American symbols – an uncommon practice for US soldiers in Syria.<sup>1033</sup> The United States needed to demonstrate its presence in Manbij, but it is unclear who was the primary target of this signal – the Russian military, who were considered a potential adversary, or the Turkish military, who were their de jure NATO allies.

The presence of American and other Western military forces in Syria has faced the challenge of the legality of their presence. Both Damascus and Moscow have repeatedly claimed that the presence of Western military personnel in Syria is illegal, as they have not received permission from either the Syrian government or any international institutions, unlike Russia and Iran, who operated in Syria by official agreement with Damascus.<sup>1034</sup> Consequently, the American side has constantly relied on new excuses to justify the illegal presence of its troops in a foreign country. The primary justification has been the need to combat the Islamic State\*, and the UNSC resolutions, which called for fighting the terrorist group, have been used to support this argument. However, these resolutions did not authorize the United States to undertake any specific actions, particularly on Syrian soil. Despite this, such an excuse continued to be used in Washington. In January 2020, Major General Grynkewich, the Deputy Commander of Operation Inherent Resolve for operations and intelligence, stated that effective management is required for the enduring defeat of ISIS\*, which the Syrian regime and its allies are supposedly unable to provide, and that ISIS\* has not yet been completely destroyed.<sup>1035</sup>

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<sup>1031</sup> Turkish agency publishes... (In Russ.). URL: <https://ria.ru/syria/20170719/1498774287.html> (accessed: 03.05.2020)

<sup>1032</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>1033</sup> Why are US troops in the Syrian city of Manbij? // ABC News. January 17, 2019. URL: <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/us-troops-syrian-city-manbij/story?id=60421763> (accessed: 03.05.2020)

<sup>1034</sup> Russia's Lavrov Says Trump May Have Met Putin More Times // CBS News. July 21, 2017. URL: <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/trump-putin-may-have-met-more-times-says-russia-s-n785146> (accessed: 04.05.2020)

<sup>1035</sup> Department Of Defense Off-Camera Press Briefing By Major General Alexis Grynkewich // U.S. Department of Defense. January 23, 2020. URL: <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2063705/departement-of-defense-off-camera-press-briefing-by-major-general-alexus-grynkew/> (accessed: 04.05.2020)

Despite the illegality of the US military's presence in Syria, they have used force to repel anyone attempting to enter the territory they occupy. One such instance was the “Battle of Khasham,” where a combined force of the Syrian army, pro-Iranian militias, and Russian mercenaries from the Wagner PMC tried to occupy the Khasham and At-Tabia gas fields in the Deir-ez-Zor governorate, only to be met with a powerful retaliatory strike from the US. It is worth noting that the attackers violated the Russian-American agreements made in the summer of 2017, which designated the Euphrates as the “deconflicting line” between government troops and the SDF, and were unaware that the local headquarters of the SDF would be in the offensive area, as well as American military advisers.<sup>1036</sup> However, this was not the first or last time that the US military deliberately attacked Syrian government forces entering their “sphere of influence.” The most strikes occurred in the 55-kilometer zone around the Al-Tanf base, an area where the SDF does not operate, which could at least in some way justify and legitimize the presence of American troops there.

Towards the end of 2017, the number of US troops in Syria had peaked. While there were 1,547 American soldiers in the country in September.<sup>1037</sup> by December 7, the Department of Defense officially acknowledged that the number had increased to around 2,000.<sup>1038</sup> However, by this time, almost all the major strongholds of the Islamic State\*<sup>1039</sup> in Syria had already been eliminated. This led Donald Trump to believe that it was time to withdraw US troops from the country, as he announced at the end of March 2018. Despite this, his decision was met with strong opposition in the State Department and the Pentagon, who believed that the lasting defeat of ISIS\* had not yet been achieved. Trump fired Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who had been a proponent of keeping troops in Syria.<sup>1040</sup> and replaced him with Mike Pompeo, who was able to persuade the president that the troops should remain for additional reasons, such as containing Iranian influence and preventing the regime from gaining control over oil and gas deposits in the east of the country, in addition to preventing the resurgence of ISIS\*.<sup>1041</sup>

Despite the initial intention to withdraw American troops from Syria, the new Secretary of State, known for his loyalty to the president, was able to convince him otherwise. As a result, the White House's claims of returning troops home became mere statements for public consumption. Instead, new bases were established in Syria, such as the “large military base” being constructed by American forces in the

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<sup>1036</sup> *Tabler A.* Russia Crosses the Euphrates: Implications // The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. September 18, 2017. URL: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/russia-crosses-the-euphrates-implications> (accessed: 05.05.2020)

<sup>1037</sup> *Jakobsen J.* The Geopolitics of U.S. Overseas Troops and Withdrawal. Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2022. P. 179. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-030-94488-9

<sup>1038</sup> Pentagon Announces Troop Levels in Iraq, Syria // U.S. Department of Defense. December 7, 2017. URL: <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/1390079/pentagon-announces-troop-levels-in-iraq-syria/> (accessed: 04.05.2020)

<sup>1039</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>1040</sup> Remarks on the Way Forward for the United States Regarding Syria // U.S. Department of State. January 17, 2018. URL: <https://www.state.gov/remarks-on-the-way-forward-for-the-united-states-regarding-syria/> (accessed: 04.05.2020)

<sup>1041</sup> *Pompeo M.* Never Give an Inch. Broadside Books, 2023. P. 132.

area of the Al-Omar oil field, as reported by the SDF in March 2018.<sup>1042</sup> Moreover, Washington's official rhetoric changed, and it began to openly state in the fall of 2018 that one of the US objectives in Syria was “the withdrawal of all Iranian and pro-Iranian forces from the country.”<sup>1043</sup>

At the end of December 2018, there was another sudden change in the situation. The State Department<sup>1044</sup> and the Pentagon<sup>1045</sup> stated that troop withdrawal was still far off, and that there were still tasks to be completed, and National Security Advisor John Bolton had instructed subordinates to ensure that the Coalition partners knew that US military would remain in Syria until Iran withdrew from the country. This caused confusion among US allies and within the US government when Trump tweeted on December 19<sup>th</sup> that ISIS\*<sup>1046</sup> had been defeated and that he had decided to withdraw all 2,000 American troops from Syria. According to sources within the US government, this decision was made during a phone call with Turkish President Erdogan, who convinced him that Türkiye could handle the remaining terrorists. Despite objections from within his administration, Trump stood firm on his decision to withdraw troops from Syria. It seemed that Trump actually did not buy into the idea of keeping the troops in Syria, despite the fact that his subordinates believed they were able to convince him.<sup>1047</sup>

The withdrawal of troops from Syria by Trump had a two-fold impact. Some individuals within the United States and the Coalition's countries were immediately vocal in their opposition to the President's move. Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis and Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition Brett McGurk resigned in protest, and French President Emmanuel Macron expressed disappointment in the decision made by his American counterpart, emphasizing the importance of reliability and coordination among allies.<sup>1048</sup>

On the flip side, the process of immediately withdrawing all troops from Syria was far from straightforward. Despite Trump's initial announcement, John Bolton sooner added two conditions to the withdrawal: “eradicating ISIS\*” and “obtaining guarantees from Türkiye that it will not hit America's

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<sup>1042</sup> US establishes large military base in oil-rich Syrian province – SDF // Al Masdar News. March 2018, 2018. URL: <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/us-establishes-large-military-base-in-oil-rich-syrian-province-sdf/> (accessed: 05.05.2020)

<sup>1043</sup> Operation Inherent Resolve, Report to the United States Congress, July 1, 2019 – October 25, 2019. P. 27. URL: [https://media.defense.gov/2019/Nov/19/2002213188/-1/-1/1/Q4FY2019\\_LEADIG\\_OIR\\_REPORT.PDF](https://media.defense.gov/2019/Nov/19/2002213188/-1/-1/1/Q4FY2019_LEADIG_OIR_REPORT.PDF) (accessed: 20.03.2023)

<sup>1044</sup> *Sanger D.* A Strategy of Retreat... URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/19/us/politics/trump-syria-withdrawal-obama.html> (accessed: 05.05.2020)

<sup>1045</sup> *Rempfer K.* The US military is putting new observation posts in northern Syria // Army Times. November 21, 2018. URL: <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2018/11/21/the-us-military-is-putting-brand-new-observation-posts-in-northern-syria/> (accessed: 05.05.2020)

<sup>1046</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>1047</sup> Trump orders US troops... URL: <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-announce-us-withdraw-troops-syria-official/story?id=59906876> (accessed: 05.05.2020)

<sup>1048</sup> Macron regrets US decision to withdraw troops from Syria (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. December 23, 2018. URL: <https://ria.ru/20181223/1548519793.html> (accessed: 05.05.2020)



Kurdish allies.”<sup>1049</sup> Dates for the withdrawal were pushed back more and more, with some figures ranging from 60 to 120 days, and at times it was even unclear whether the withdrawal would occur or not. Additionally, by the end of January 2019, extra troops were sent to Syria to “prepare equipment and material for export from the country,” and by the start of February, the total number of American military personnel in Syria had increased to 3,000.<sup>1050</sup>

As of the end of March, it appeared that a final plan of withdrawal had been agreed upon. The intention was to reduce the number of American troops on the ground to 1,000 by early May, and then to gradually make further reductions every 6 months while assessing the situation, until only 400 troops remained in Syria. Of these, 200 would be stationed in the northeast in territories controlled by the SDF, and 200 would be located in the southeast at the Al-Tanf base. It was emphasized that these troops would work towards countering Iran's influence throughout the country.<sup>1051</sup>

However, external factors intervened again. The United States tried to balance relations between Türkiye and the SDF through various means such as creating “road maps,” joint patrols and observation posts, and containing the influence of the Syrian Kurds. Yet Türkiye was not satisfied with what it considered to be half-measures and on October 6, 2019, the White House released a statement announcing the immediate withdrawal of American forces from Northern Syria due to the imminent start of the Turkish “long-planned operation.” It was also said that the US military would not support or be involved in the operation.<sup>1052</sup> The sudden departure was unexpected for American servicemen on the ground, who were not involved in the big politics. Bases were left hastily and were subsequently occupied by soldiers of the Syrian and Russian armies under an agreement reached on October 13 between the Assad government and the SDF. At times, Americans left their positions without removing equipment and ammunition, which were then destroyed by air strikes from their own fighter jets.<sup>1053</sup>

It is also worth noting that the troops were not withdrawn home but to the neighboring Iraq, where they could conduct raids against the remaining forces of ISIS\*<sup>1054</sup> and be relocated back to Syria if needed, which they soon did. By the end of October, American forces began to return to Syria, mainly to the eastern governorates of Deir-ez-Zor and Al-Hasakah, where most of Syria's oil and gas deposits were located. Initially, this was explained by the need to protect the deposits from ISIS\* militants, but it

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<sup>1049</sup> *Sanger D., Weiland N., Schmitt E.* Bolton Puts Conditions on Syria Withdrawal, Suggesting a Delay of Months or Years // The New York Times. January 6, 2019. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/06/world/middleeast/bolton-syria-pullout.html> (accessed: 05.05.2020)

<sup>1050</sup> White House decision looms as US military continues with Syria withdrawal plan // ABC News. February 9, 2019. URL: <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/white-house-decision-looms-us-military-continues-syria/story?id=60945224> (accessed: 05.05.2020)

<sup>1051</sup> *Schmitt E.* U.S. Troops Leaving Syria, but Some May Stay Longer Than Expected // The New York Times. March 29, 2019. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/29/world/middleeast/us-troops-syria-isis.html> (accessed: 06.05.2020)

<sup>1052</sup> Statement from the Press Secretary // The White House. October 6, 2019. URL: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/statement-press-secretary-85/> (accessed: 12.04.2023)

<sup>1053</sup> US conducts airstrike on weapons storage site as troops pull out of Syria // CNN. October 16, 2019. URL: <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/10/16/politics/us-airstrike-storage-site-syria/index.html> (accessed: 06.05.2020)

<sup>1054</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

was later revealed that it was to prevent them from falling into the hands of the Assad government, Iran, and Russia. As a result, the number of American troops in Syria was again increased to 900 men.<sup>1055</sup> Trump openly stated that the US “should be able to take some [oil]” and planned to involve “one of our great oil companies” in this endeavor.<sup>1056</sup> This situation was further complicated by the fact that American troops were now in close proximity to Russian forces, who also planned to occupy the oil fields in the east of the country. This led to conflicts with both the SDF fighters<sup>1057</sup> and the Americans themselves.<sup>1058</sup>

In December, US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper announced that the size of the American contingent in Syria would fluctuate around 600 in the near future.<sup>1059</sup> This change in the number of troops explains a shift in tactics by the Americans. In April 2020, they formed a special Arab unit to protect oil fields in eastern Syria from Assad and pro-Iranian troops<sup>1060</sup>, which can be interpreted as a move to weaken the Kurdish factor and avoid giving Türkiye unnecessary reasons to escalate the situation. It appears that the White House continued to prioritize the policy of reducing the direct American presence in Syria.

Therefore, we can draw the conclusion that the dynamics of the United States' military presence in Syria during Trump's presidency were influenced by a multitude of internal and external factors that, at times, altered the direction of this influence. Generally, three distinct stages can be identified, each characterized by different primary objectives pursued by the US in Syria. During the initial stage (early 2017 to mid-2018), the main objective of the US military presence in the country was to eradicate Islamic State\*<sup>1061</sup> physically and achieve a major military victory, which led to the capture of Raqqa. During this period, the US military presence gradually intensified, eventually reaching its peak. The second stage (mid-2018 to late-2019) saw the task of containing Iranian influence in Syria become the primary objective, which required fewer resources and boots on the ground, resulting in a gradual reduction in the number of troops. During the third stage (late 2019 to 2020), Washington prioritized preventing the Assad government and its allies from accessing the oil reserves in eastern Syria. This was the most turbulent period, during which the US military presence in Syria initially decreased sharply due to the Turkish Operation Peace Spring, then grew again, almost reaching the levels of the second stage, but

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<sup>1055</sup> *Schmitt E., Cooper H.* Hundreds of U.S. Troops Leaving, and Also Arriving in, Syria // The New York Times. October 30, 2019. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/30/world/middleeast/us-troops-syria-trump.html> (accessed: 06.05.2020)

<sup>1056</sup> On Syrian oil, Trump says US ‘should be able to take some’ // MSNBC. October 28, 2019. URL: <http://www.msnbc.com/rachel-maddow-show/syrian-oil-trump-says-us-should-be-able-to-take-some> (accessed: 06.05.2020)

<sup>1057</sup> Anadolu (Turkey): Russia has eyes on US-controlled Syrian oil fields (In Russ.) // InoSMI. January 20, 2020. URL: <https://inosmi.ru/politic/20200120/246650367.html> (accessed: 06.05.2020)

<sup>1058</sup> *Schmitt E.* Russians Pressure U.S. Forces in Northeast Syria // The New York Times. February 14, 2020. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/14/world/middleeast/russia-northeast-syria.html> (accessed: 19.07.2023)

<sup>1059</sup> Exclusive: U.S. military completes pullback from northeast Syria, Esper says // Reuters. December 5, 2019. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-usa-syria-exclusive-idUSKBN1Y90CU> (accessed: 06.05.2020)

<sup>1060</sup> The United States began to form... (In Russ.). URL: <https://lenta.ru/news/2020/04/29/usaprivlekaytsiriu/> (accessed: 06.05.2020)

<sup>1061</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

eventually shifted towards the “Syrianization”<sup>1062</sup> of the conflict and a gradual withdrawal of US military forces from the country.

### 3.3. Trump Administration Sanctions Policy on Syria

Starting from the early days of its term, the Trump administration maintained the previous administration’s policy of imposing sanctions on Syria. On April 24, the US Department of the Treasury placed sanctions on 271 experts in chemistry, alleging their involvement in the development of chemical weapons that were reportedly used in Khan Sheikhoun on April 4, 2017.<sup>1063</sup> Additionally, on May 9, Trump extended the preexisting sanctions regime, which was based on eight executive orders signed by Presidents Bush and Obama, for another year. The White House stated that the extension was necessary due to the “extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States” posed by the production of “chemical and biological weapons, support for terrorist organizations, and obstruction of the effective functioning of the government of Lebanon,” as well as the atrocities and violations of human rights committed by the Assad regime during the Syrian Civil War.<sup>1064</sup>

At first glance, it might appear that the new administration's sanctions policy towards Syria did not deviate significantly from its predecessor, and that Trump's pre-election statements about possible cooperation with Russia and Syria were merely rhetoric. However, upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that both actions were not overtly aggressive, but rather aimed to create the appearance of such. The sanctions imposed on Syrian scientists were merely an accompanying measure to the strike on the Shayrat airbase, which was also a display of force, while the extension of the existing sanctions was a mere formality.

The struggle between the President and Congress over the adoption of the CAATSA (Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act) becomes even more significant on this background. The law, proposed by Congress, targeted two of Syria's primary allies, Russia and Iran. The President had to develop a strategy to counter “destabilizing Iranian activities,” including financial and military support for the Assad regime.<sup>1065</sup> The law was particularly harsh on Russia, with sanctions imposed for assisting

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<sup>1062</sup> Similar to the “Vietnamization” of the Vietnam War, a policy put forward by the Nixon administration in 1969 to gradually reduce the direct US military presence in Vietnam and strengthen South Vietnam's military and economy to the point where Saigon could stand up to communist North Vietnam on its own.

<sup>1063</sup> Treasury Sanctions 271 Syrian Scientific Studies and Research Center Staff in Response to Sarin Attack on Khan Sheikhoun // U.S. Department of the Treasury. April 24, 2017. URL: <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/sm0056.aspx> (accessed: 05.04.2020)

<sup>1064</sup> Notice Regarding the Continuation of the National Emergency with Respect to the Actions of the Government of Syria // The White House. May 9, 2017. URL: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/notice-regarding-continuation-national-emergency-respect-actions-government-syria/> (accessed: 12.04.2023)

<sup>1065</sup> H.R. 3364. Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act. August 2, 2017. Sec. 103. URL: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-115publ44/pdf/PLAW-115publ44.pdf> (accessed: 20.03.2023)

Syria in the development or production of chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons, ballistic or cruise missiles, as well as providing “destabilizing numbers and types” of modern conventional weapons.<sup>1066</sup> Additionally, the President faced restrictions on lifting previously imposed sanctions on Russia, requiring the approval of the relevant congressional committees.<sup>1067</sup>

It was not unexpected that Congress's move caused significant discontent within the executive branch, especially from President Donald Trump himself. Although he did not use his veto, as Congress could have overridden it, he signed the bill while calling it “flawed” and an infringement on “the powers of the executive branch under (international) treaties.”<sup>1068</sup> Trump's reaction was not surprising, given his aspirations to negotiate with Russia on joint measures to combat the Islamic State\*<sup>1069</sup> and diminish Iranian influence across the region.

The US Congress continued its legislative efforts to influence Syria and its allies through sanctions, resulting in the creation of several bills, with the largest being the Strengthening America's Security in the Middle East Act and the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act. The latter had a longer history, while having been part of the former bill for some time. The struggle for the passage of the first bill during the last US federal government shutdown is of particular interest. Despite the fact that a majority of Democrats would have clearly supported the proposed measures, they blocked its passage in the Senate three times, refusing to do so until the government resumed work.<sup>1070</sup> Finally, on February 5, the bill passed the Senate with a 74-19 vote and was transferred to the House of Representatives, but it did not progress further.

The Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act is a more noteworthy piece of legislation. It was named after a whistleblower who exposed war crimes allegedly committed by the Assad regime. The bill was first introduced to Congress in mid-2016 during the Obama administration, with its initial version being the toughest. It required the president to report on the possibility of establishing a no-fly zone in Syria.<sup>1071</sup> and to provide Congress with the names of those responsible or involved in gross human rights violations in the country.<sup>1072</sup> Although the bill successfully passed the House of Representatives, it did not advance further. Over the next few years, attempts were made to pass the bill in the 115<sup>th</sup> and 116<sup>th</sup> Congresses. In the latter, the Caesar Act was introduced to Congress on January 9, 2019 and partially incorporated

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<sup>1066</sup> Ibid. Sec. 234.

<sup>1067</sup> Ibid. Sec. 228.

<sup>1068</sup> Statement by President Donald J. Trump on Signing the “Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act” // The White House. August 2, 2017. URL: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-donald-j-trump-signing-countering-americas-adversaries-sanctions-act/> (accessed: 06.04.2023)

<sup>1069</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>1070</sup> Senate advances Middle East bill, now that government is reopened // CNN. January 28, 2019. URL: <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/01/28/politics/middle-east-bill-senate-vote> (accessed: 07.04.2020)

<sup>1071</sup> H.R. 5732. Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2016. November 16, 2016. Sec. 303. URL: <https://www.congress.gov/114/bills/hr5732/BILLS-114hr5732rfs.pdf> (accessed: 20.03.2023)

<sup>1072</sup> Ibid. Sec. 302.

(70%) into the National Defense Authorization Act for 2020, which was adopted by the Senate on December 17, 2019, and signed by President Trump three days later.

The Caesar Act introduced several measures, including orders to investigate the Central Bank of Syria for suspected money laundering and the imposition of new sanctions on third-party countries that cooperate with the Assad regime. These sanctions may target industries such as mining, processing, aviation, construction, and engineering<sup>1073</sup>, which could have a negative impact on Syria's reconstruction efforts and the millions of people living there. A bit cynical on this background is looking a section titled "Assistance to the Syrian People." The Caesar Act also as usual imposed congressional restrictions on the President regarding lifting the sanctions<sup>1074</sup>. It is not surprising that Caesar Act eventually had to be included in a large and serious document belonging to the "must pass" category for its successful adoption<sup>1075</sup>.

The sanctions imposed due to the situation in Syria were not limited to Damascus or its allies. At one point, the US had to impose restrictions on its own ally, Türkiye, following the events that took place during Operation Peace Spring. On October 14, 2019, Donald Trump signed Executive Order 13894, which empowered the Department of Treasury, in consultation with the State Department, to impose sanctions on Türkiye for its actions in northeastern Syria<sup>1076</sup>. Trump also announced an increase in tariffs on Turkish steel to 50%<sup>1077</sup>. The Treasury Department subsequently imposed sanctions on the Turkish Department of Defense, the Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources, as well as their respective heads and the Minister of the Interior<sup>1078</sup>. However, after Operation Peace Spring came to an end, Washington lifted all sanctions against Türkiye, as promised.

It is also interesting to note the increase in the pace of the "sanctions machine gun" in 2020, which, in all likelihood, can be associated with the approaching presidential election, which required Trump to demonstrate certain foreign policy successes against the backdrop of failures in the fight against the coronavirus pandemic. Thus, sanctions were imposed against President Assad's advisor on media issues Luna al-Shibl and her husband<sup>1079</sup>, individuals and companies responsible for the revival of the Syrian

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<sup>1073</sup> S. 1790. National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020. December 19, 2019. Sec. 7412. URL: <https://www.congress.gov/116/plaws/pub192/PLAW-116publ92.pdf> (accessed: 20.03.2023)

<sup>1074</sup> Ibid. Sec. 7431.

<sup>1075</sup> Congress Authorizes Sanctions On Syria, Iran And Russia // NPR. December 17, 2019. URL: <https://www.npr.org/2019/12/17/788924967/congress-authorizes-sanctions-on-syria-iran-and-russia> (accessed: 07.04.2020)

<sup>1076</sup> Executive Order 13894 – Blocking Property and Suspending Entry of Certain Persons Contributing to the Situation in Syria. October 14, 2019. URL: <https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/126/13894.pdf> (accessed: 07.03.2023)

<sup>1077</sup> Trump announces 50% increase in steel tariffs for Türkiye (In Russ.) // Rossiyskaya Gazeta. October 15, 2019. URL: <https://rg.ru/2019/10/15/trump-anonsiroval-velichenie-do-50-poshlin-na-stal-dlia-turcii.html> (accessed: 14.07.2023)

<sup>1078</sup> Treasury Designates Turkish Ministries and Senior Officials in Response to Military Action in Syria // U.S. Department of the Treasury. October 14, 2019. URL: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm792> (accessed: 07.04.2020)

<sup>1079</sup> Treasury Sanctions Senior Syrian Government Officials // U.S. Department of the Treasury. August 20, 2020. URL: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1100> (accessed: 06.03.2023)

oil industry<sup>1080</sup>, as well as against the Central Bank of Syria.<sup>1081</sup> It is worth noting that some of the sanctions were introduced after the November 6 elections. It is possible that these sanctions were aimed at worsening relations with Syria and Iran and thereby reducing the likelihood of the United States under Joe Biden returning to the Iranian nuclear deal. Finally, it is also worth noting the US refusal to lift sanctions against Syria in connection with the pandemic itself, despite the calls of the UN and WHO.<sup>1082</sup>

The influence of domestic political struggles on US policy in Syria was evident in this issue. The President appeared reluctant to impose excessive sanctions on Syria and its allies, choosing instead to extend existing sanctions and introduce new ones based on the prevailing circumstances. Congress, on the other hand, pushed for increasingly restrictive bills to pressure US opponents, thereby limiting the executive branch's flexibility to act. This tug-of-war narrowed the President's room for maneuvering.

### Chapter 3 Conclusions

During the first few months of Donald Trump's presidency, there appeared to be no discernible foreign policy strategy, especially when it came to Syria. One can agree with Michael Wolf's perspective in his book, *Fire and Fury*, which suggests that Trump and his team had no plans or forecasts because they did not expect to win the election. As a result, Trump mostly followed his campaign promises or reacted to exceptional events in his own expressive manner, such as the chemical attack in Khan Sheikhoun. This lack of a clear action plan or vision for Syria meant that Trump's approach was often reactionary and lacked a comprehensive strategy.

While Trump lacked a clear strategy for Syria, professionals in Congress, and in the diplomatic corps held a different view. Congress nearly unified in its opposition to what it perceived as Trump's soft approach towards Syria and Russia, continuing to push for the Obama-era strategy of ousting the Assad government. Diplomats, largely supporting the discourse of the previous administration, also reinforced this approach. The military, however, was partly in support of Trump, wary of getting involved in another prolonged war in the Middle East, but also frustrated with the new president's impulsiveness and inexperience in constantly intruding on their area of responsibility.

The situation began to change in 2017-2018 due to several factors. Firstly, Trump gained more experience in foreign policy during his first year in office, which allowed him to shed some of his illusions and strengthen his position in the White House. Secondly, the appointment of Mike Pompeo as Secretary of State brought a tougher stance on foreign policy, including Syria, and a loyalty to Trump

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<sup>1080</sup> Treasury Imposes Sanctions on Petroleum Network, Senior Syrian Officials, and Syrian Entities // U.S. Department of the Treasury. November 9, 2020. URL: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1178> (accessed: 06.03.2023)

<sup>1081</sup> Treasury Targets Syrian Regime Officials and the Central Bank of Syria // U.S. Department of the Treasury. December 22, 2020. URL: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1220> (accessed: 06.03.2023)

<sup>1082</sup> *Dolgov B.* Syrian Confrontation: Internal... (In Russ.). P. 170-171.

allowed him to implement this position in practice. Thirdly, the defeat of Islamic State\*<sup>1083</sup> shifted the focus to the future of Syria, prompting potential beneficiaries to increase their pressure in the struggle for influence on its definition. As a result, the situation in Syria became more complex and required a more nuanced approach from the US government.

As a result, the Trump administration formalized a quasi-strategic course in Syria based on a combination of factors. The United States had both a weakness and a strength in the Syrian conflict. The weakness was that forces allied with Washington had lost in the civil war, while the Assad government, backed by Russia and Iran, had taken over most of the territory. The so-called “moderate opposition” was confined to small enclaves, and the Syrian Kurds and Türkiye were in conflict. On the other hand, the American narrative on the Syrian conflict still mostly dominated the global discourse. As a result, the winners of the civil war were nearly marginalized.

In this context, it can be inferred that Washington pursued a quasi-strategic course that aimed to create difficulties for Damascus and its allies in Moscow and Tehran. The primary objectives of the United States were to divide the ranks of the victorious parties, increase their isolation on the international stage, and weaken Syria to such an extent that it would become an “uncomfortable ally” for each of them and any other party who would like to cooperate with Damascus.

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<sup>1083</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

## Chapter 4. U.S. Syria Policy During Joe Biden's Presidency (2021-2022)

### 4.1. Joe Biden Administration Diplomacy Regarding the Syrian Conflict

#### 4.1.1. Joe Biden Administration and the Syrian Peace Process

The Syrian peace process by the beginning of the presidency of Joe Biden finally turned into a white elephant. The Geneva process, which in 2019 finally transformed into the Syrian Constitutional Committee (SCC) under the leadership of UN Special Envoy Geir Pedersen, found itself in a dead end, unable to resolve the contradictions between the government and opposition delegations. The Astana format, auxiliary in relation to the SCC and the Geneva process, also experienced hard times. The COVID-19 pandemic played an important role in this, putting many international processes on pause, forcing all states and international organizations to devote all their efforts to fighting the disease.

Among other things, this state of the negotiation process determined the attitude of the United States towards it, which no longer showed much interest in it. President Biden and representatives of the White House for all two years never raised this topic in their speeches and briefings. Official representatives of the State Department basically got off with routine phrases about the significance of the work of the SCC and support for the efforts of Special Envoy Pedersen<sup>1084</sup>. The same can be said about the joint statements of American representatives and their allies within the framework of the Syrian Contact Group, which replaced the “small group” on Syria<sup>1085</sup>. At the same time, American diplomats also complained about the shortcomings in the work of the SCC, rightly noting that “it’s been two years since the inauguration of the Constitutional Committee, and we have yet to see the members actually discuss a single clause or a single sentence of the constitution.”<sup>1086</sup>

However, Washington was able to benefit even from failures in the peace process of the Syrian conflict: this topic has been actively used by the United States to accuse its opponents. American diplomats did not miss the opportunity to do this literally at any meeting or briefing in the UNSC

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<sup>1084</sup> See, e.g.: Remarks by Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield at a UN Security Council Briefing on the Political Situation in Syria // U.S. Mission to the United Nations. June 25, 2021. URL: <https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-by-ambassador-linda-thomas-greenfield-at-a-un-security-council-briefing-on-the-political-situation-in-syria/> (accessed: 01.03.2023); Remarks at a UN Security Council Briefing on the Political and Humanitarian Situation in Syria // U.S. Mission to the United Nations. March 24, 2022. URL: <https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-at-a-un-security-council-briefing-on-the-political-and-humanitarian-situation-in-syria-2/> (accessed: 01.03.2023)

<sup>1085</sup> Joint Statement on the Syria Special Envoy Meeting // U.S. Department of State. December 2, 2021. URL: <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-syria-special-envoy-meeting/> (accessed: 01.03.2023); Joint Statement on the Occasion of the 11-year Anniversary of the Syrian Uprising // U.S. Department of State. March 15, 2022. URL: <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-occasion-of-the-11-year-anniversary-of-the-syrian-uprising/> (accessed: 01.03.2023)

<sup>1086</sup> Remarks at a UN Security Council Briefing on Syria // U.S. Mission to the United Nations. September 28, 2021. URL: <https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-at-a-un-security-council-briefing-on-syria-8/> (accessed: 01.03.2023)



dedicated to the Syrian problem. The main culprits for the stagnation in the work of the SCC were obvious to the United States – these were the government in Damascus and its Russian ally<sup>1087</sup>.

Analyzing the statements of American representatives about the Syrian peace process, one can conclude that there were two stages in the development of the administration's attitude towards it. During the first stage, which lasted from early 2021 to early 2022, State Department representatives preferred a rather non-confrontational rhetoric towards their counterparts. Russia's actions in this context during this period were not criticized at all. As for the Assad regime, although there were rebukes in his direction, they created the impression of a rather formal criticism. The United States urged the SAR government to “seriously pursue the avenues towards peace”<sup>1088</sup>, expressed disappointment with the “Assad regime participants’ unwillingness to make progress”<sup>1089</sup>, and called the failure of the next round of negotiations “one more missed opportunity by the regime to show its sincere commitment to the committee’s work.”<sup>1090</sup>

The situation gradually began to change after the start of the Russian special military operation in Ukraine. For the first few months, while all attention was focused on the Ukrainian events, American rhetoric regarding Syria remained almost unchanged<sup>1091</sup>. Perhaps the purpose of this was to demonstrate to the Syrian government that it was not too late to withdraw support from Russia, although it is more likely that American diplomacy regarding Syria simply continued to move by inertia.

By the summer of 2022, the tone of American statements began to sharpen. Already at the end of June, US Deputy Ambassador to the UN Richard Mills placed “clear responsibility for this lack of progress” solely on the Assad government, as it “continued to stall the chance for any fruitful dialogue through its intransigence.”<sup>1092</sup>

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<sup>1087</sup> Interestingly, Iran was hardly criticized in connection with the work of the Constitutional Committee. This can probably be explained by Moscow’s greater visible contribution to the Syrian peace process as a member of the P5, which, accordingly, caused more backfire” in response, in contrast to Tehran, which, for various reasons, was almost not involved in the Geneva peace process.

<sup>1088</sup> Remarks at a UN Security Council Briefing on the Political and Humanitarian Situation in Syria // U.S. Mission to the United Nations. December 20, 2021. URL: <https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-at-a-un-security-council-briefing-on-the-political-and-humanitarian-situation-in-syria/> (accessed: 01.03.2023)

<sup>1089</sup> Remarks at a UN Security Briefing on the Political Situation in Syria // U.S. Mission to the United Nations. January 26, 2022. URL: <https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-at-a-un-security-briefing-on-the-political-situation-in-syria/> (accessed: 01.03.2023)

<sup>1090</sup> Remarks at a UN Security Council Briefing on Syria // U.S. Mission to the United Nations. October 27, 2021. URL: <https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-at-a-un-security-council-briefing-on-syria-9/> (accessed: 01.03.2023)

<sup>1091</sup> See: Remarks at a UN Security Council Briefing on the Political and Humanitarian Situation in Syria // U.S. Mission to the United Nations. March 24, 2022. URL: <https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-at-a-un-security-council-briefing-on-the-political-and-humanitarian-situation-in-syria-2/> (accessed: 01.03.2023); Remarks at a UN Security Council Briefing on the Political and Humanitarian Situation in Syria // U.S. Mission to the United Nations. April 26, 2022. URL: <https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-at-a-un-security-council-briefing-on-the-political-and-humanitarian-situation-in-syria-3/> (accessed: 01.03.2023)

<sup>1092</sup> Remarks at a UN Security Council Briefing on the Political Situation in Syria // U.S. Embassy in Syria. June 29, 2022. URL: <https://sy.usembassy.gov/remarks-at-a-un-security-council-briefing-on-the-political-situation-in-syria/> (accessed: 01.03.2023)

However, the maximum rejection from the American side was caused by Moscow's statement about the unacceptability of the further work of the SCC in Geneva “due to the unfriendly, hostile position of Switzerland towards Russia.”<sup>1093</sup> The government in Damascus also agreed with Russia's position, which was perceived in Washington as pressure from the Kremlin.<sup>1094</sup> From the US perspective, Russia “continued to obstruct the process of the Constitutional Committee for reasons entirely unrelated to Syria”<sup>1095</sup> and “put its narrow interests, and those of the Assad regime, ahead of peace, stability, and Syrians’ ever-growing humanitarian needs.”<sup>1096</sup>

The demands to the Syrian side of the United States also began to grow. In the fall of 2022, the government in Damascus began to be required to “take meaningful action” to “demonstrate its commitment to the political process,” such as providing information about 130,000 “disappeared or arbitrarily detained Syrians.”<sup>1097</sup> By the end of the year, the Syrian government, in conjunction with the resumption of the work of the SCC, was also required to “agree to and implement a comprehensive, nationwide ceasefire.”<sup>1098</sup> The “new old” requirements, for all their seeming concreteness, turn out to be rather vague and indistinct upon closer examination. If the demand to release the “arbitrarily detained” (although the degree of arbitrariness of detention in this case is in itself a very controversial issue) can still be accepted for consideration, then a similar requirement in relation to the “disappeared” in itself sounds rather strange, since for some reason it a priori assumes that all these “disappeared” did it precisely in the conditional “Assad dungeons.” The demand for a ceasefire regime sounds all the more strange in relation to the situation for the autumn-winter of 2022, when large-scale hostilities in Syria have not been conducted for almost three years.

In conclusion, it is worth saying a few words about the attitude of the United States towards the Astana process. In this case, the tone of the position of the new administration was set back in February 2021, when the United States refused to participate in the next meeting in the Astana format as

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<sup>1093</sup> Russia proposes to move sessions of the Syrian Constitutional Committee to the UAE or Oman (In Russ.) // TASS. June 16, 2022. URL: <https://tass.ru/politika/14931075> (accessed: 01.03.2023)

<sup>1094</sup> Remarks at a UN General Assembly Meeting Following Russia’s Veto of a UN Security Council Resolution on the Syria Cross-Border Humanitarian Mechanism // U.S. Mission to the United Nations. July 21, 2022. URL: <https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-at-a-un-general-assembly-meeting-following-russias-veto-of-a-un-security-council-resolution-on-the-syria-cross-border-humanitarian-mechanism/> (accessed: 01.03.2023)

<sup>1095</sup> Remarks by Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield at a UN Security Council Briefing on Syria // U.S. Embassy in Syria. September 14, 2022. URL: <https://sy.usembassy.gov/remarks-by-ambassador-linda-thomas-greenfield-at-a-un-security-council-briefing-on-syria/> (accessed: 01.03.2023)

<sup>1096</sup> Remarks at a UN Security Council Briefing on the Political Situation in Syria // U.S. Mission to the United Nations. August 29, 2022. URL: <https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-at-a-un-security-council-briefing-on-the-political-situation-in-syria-8/> (accessed: 01.03.2023)

<sup>1097</sup> Remarks at a UN Security Council Briefing on Syria // U.S. Embassy in Syria. October 25, 2022. URL: <https://sy.usembassy.gov/remarks-at-a-un-security-council-briefing-on-syria-2/> (accessed: 01.03.2023)

<sup>1098</sup> Remarks at a UN Security Council Briefing on the Political and Humanitarian Situation in Syria // U.S. Embassy in Syria. December 21, 2022. URL: <https://sy.usembassy.gov/remarks-at-a-un-security-council-briefing-on-the-political-and-humanitarian-situation-in-syria/> (accessed: 01.03.2023)

observers.<sup>1099</sup> A bit later, US Ambassador to Kazakhstan William Moser clarified his country's position, saying that the Geneva process is the most suitable for resolving the conflict, and therefore the US now “does not want to be an observer in another process.”<sup>1100</sup> Thus, despite the fact that subsequently Russia repeatedly called on the United States to rejoin the Astana process.<sup>1101</sup>, this did not follow.

In general, we can talk about a significant evolution of the US position under Biden regarding the Syrian peace settlement. For the first year and a half, American diplomats were quite formal about the position of the official government of Syria on the SCC, clearly not wanting to aggravate the situation, but in the summer of 2022 the picture changed dramatically. If earlier in Washington, despite all the disagreements with Moscow, they regarded it rather as an actor capable of influencing Damascus in the right direction, then the new direction in which the Kremlin was pushing its protégé clearly contradicted the plans of the United States. In these circumstances, the United States also decided to escalate, toughening the rhetoric and putting forward additional, moreover, extensive and difficult to implement conditions against the Assad government.

#### **4.1.2. The Diplomatic Struggle Over the Cross-Border Mechanism**

Against the backdrop of insufficient progress in the Syrian peace process, as well as the absence of any other significant diplomatic initiatives in this field, the problem of the cross-border mechanism for the delivery of humanitarian aid to the country unexpectedly came to the fore. On this issue, the position of the United States and its allies in the UNSC clashed with the position of Russia.

Initially, the cross-border mechanism was established in July 2014 by UNSCR 2165. According to the text of the resolution, UN humanitarian agencies and their NGO partners got the right to use the border crossings Bab al-Salam and Bab al-Hawa on the border with Türkiye, al-Yarubiya the Iraqi border and al-Ramtha on the border with Jordan “to ensure the delivery of humanitarian assistance, including medical and surgical supplies, to the needy population throughout Syria through the most direct routes upon notification of the Syrian authorities.”<sup>1102</sup> This decision was conceived solely as a temporary and necessary measure at that time, since the central government was unable to solve humanitarian problems in a number of regions of the country, especially in those adjacent to the border and not controlled by Damascus.<sup>1103</sup>

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<sup>1099</sup> The United States refused to participate in the talks on Syria in Sochi (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. February 16, 2021. URL: <https://ria.ru/20210216/peregovory-1597632087.html> (accessed: 01.03.2023)

<sup>1100</sup> Press conference with the US Ambassador to Kazakhstan (In Russ.) // U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Kazakhstan. April 21, 2021. URL: <https://kz.usembassy.gov/ru/ru-press-round-table-042121-ru/> (accessed: 01.03.2023)

<sup>1101</sup> Lavrentiev called for the return of the United States to the “Astana” format on Syria (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. November 29, 2022. URL: <https://ria.ru/20221123/siriya-1833654715.html> (accessed: 01.03.2023)

<sup>1102</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 2165 (S/RES/2165). July 14, 2014. URL: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N14/465/94/PDF/N1446594.pdf> (accessed: 02.03.2023)

<sup>1103</sup> *Khlebnikov A.* Russia's approach to the mechanism of cross-border aid delivery to Syria (In Russ.) // RIAC. August 1, 2022. URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/podkhod-rossii-k-mekhanizmu-transgranichnoy-dostavki-pomoshchi-v-siriiyu/> (accessed: 02.03.2023)

For several years, the cross-border mechanism was nearly automatically renewed every year, confirming the phrase “nothing is more permanent than temporary” by its very existence. However, with the gradual return of the territories under the control of Damascus, the cross-border mechanism ceased to be acceptable to the Syrian government and its allies, and even vice versa, it became harmful: through these border crossings, aid came to Syria bypassing Damascus, which did not contribute to the restoration of destroyed economic ties in the country. In addition, the cross-border mechanism acted as the “economic arteries of the opposition regions,”<sup>1104</sup> allowing them to maintain independence from Damascus. This made it difficult to restore government control over the entire territory of the country.

Instead, Russia, in alliance with the China, proposed placing more emphasis on the delivery of goods through the frontline (cross-line mechanism), which should be coordinated by Damascus.<sup>1105</sup> In its proposals, Russia referred to the provisions of UN General Assembly resolution 46/182 of December 19, 1991, according to which “the affected State has the primary role in the initiation, organization, coordination and implementation of humanitarian assistance within its territory.”<sup>1106</sup> As a compromise, Russia was ready to extend for 6 months the operation of one crossing, Bab al-Hawa, located on the border with Idlib enclave.

A real struggle flared up for the adoption of a resolution preserving the cross-border mechanism – as many as nine rounds of voting were held. In the end, a compromise option was adopted: only the Bab al-Hawa crossing remained, but its validity was extended for a year, until July 2021.<sup>1107</sup> US Ambassador to the UN Kelly Craft then stated that this decision was not acceptable to the United States, and on the contrary, “leave us sickened and outraged at the loss of the Bab al-Salam and al-Yarubiya border crossings.” She also noted that “until the Assad regime and its backers take the necessary and irreversible steps to implement a political solution necessary to end this conflict,” the United States will ensure that humanitarian assistance “reaches everyone in need,”<sup>1108</sup> thereby recognizing that it is in Washington’s interests to continue artificially support the existence of opposition areas.

The Biden administration was also focused on reopening closed border crossings and keeping Bab al-Hawa open as long as possible. As we noted above, in Chapter 1, the new US Ambassador to the UN,

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<sup>1104</sup> *Arfeh H.* Northwest Syria holds breath for decision on cross-border aid // *Al-Monitor*. July 1, 2020. URL: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/07/syria-idlib-humanitarian-crisis-cross-border-aid-fighting.html> (accessed: 02.03.2023)

<sup>1105</sup> Explanation of Vote on a draft resolution on cross-border mechanism of humanitarian assistance delivery to Syria // Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations. July 7, 2020. URL: [https://russiaun.ru/en/news/cbm\\_070720](https://russiaun.ru/en/news/cbm_070720) (accessed: 13.04.2023)

<sup>1106</sup> Strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian emergency assistance of the United Nations (A/RES/46/182). December 17, 1991. URL: [https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/135197\\_070720](https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/135197_070720) (accessed: 13.04.2023)

<sup>1107</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 2533 (S/RES/2533). July 13, 2020. URL: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N20/179/89/PDF/N2017989.pdf> (accessed: 02.03.2023)

<sup>1108</sup> Explanation of Vote on the Adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2533 on Syria Cross-Border Humanitarian Aid Deliveries // U.S. Mission to the United Nations. July 11, 2020. URL: <https://usun.usmission.gov/explanation-of-vote-on-the-adoption-of-un-security-council-resolution-2533-on-syria-cross-border-humanitarian-aid-deliveries/> (accessed: 02.03.2023)

Linda Thomas-Greenfield, promised to make every effort to achieve this. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken also made an emotional call in March 2021 for the reopening of the Bab al-Salam and al-Yarubiya crossings. One of the Secretary of State's arguments against the cross-line mechanism was that it would “force the UN convoys to cross multiple lines of control while negotiating access with various armed opposition groups” which “leaves more room to slow down or stop the relief effort.”<sup>1109</sup> However, it is not clear why, according to Blinken, such problems should not arise in the case of the operation of the cross-border mechanism, especially given the fact that at that time Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)<sup>\*1110</sup> was in fact in charge of everything in Idlib, claiming a significant part of the humanitarian aid supplied to the region.<sup>1111</sup>

The situation began to change towards a compromise after the summit of Russian and US Presidents Vladimir Putin and Joe Biden in Geneva in June 2021, where they discussed, among other things, the problem of humanitarian border crossings in Syria. Despite the fact that no mutual obligations followed at the end of the summit, a start was made to bilateral cooperation on this issue.<sup>1112</sup>

As the day of voting in the UNSC approached, the rhetoric of American officials softened even more. Thus, during a briefing held three days before the vote, State Department spokesman Ned Price spoke quite positively about the cross-line mechanism, noting that the United States supported its expansion, however, noting that its use alone would not be able to “meet the needs of all Syrians.” At the same time, Price could not help but point out that the United States will not deliver humanitarian aid directly to the territories controlled by the Syrian government, since it “has weaponized humanitarian access and humanitarian aid deliveries.”<sup>1113, 1114</sup>

All this surely affected the outcome of the vote. On July 9, 2021, UNSCR 2585 was adopted, which extended the operation of the Bab al-Hawa border crossing for another year, and also obliged the UN Secretary-General to make his report “with particular focus on transparency in operations, and progress on cross-line access in meeting humanitarian needs.”<sup>1115</sup> The resolution was the product of US-Russian

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<sup>1109</sup> Secretary Antony J. Blinken at the UN Security Council Briefing and Consultations on the Humanitarian Situation in Syria // U.S. Department of State. March 29, 2021. URL: <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-at-the-un-security-council-briefing-and-consultations-on-the-humanitarian-situation-in-syria/> (accessed: 02.03.2023)

<sup>1110</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>1111</sup> *Mamedov R.* Syria: international humanitarian rule, not law? (In Russ.) // Valdai Discussion Club. July 23, 2022. URL: <https://ru.valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/siriya-mezhdunarodnoe-gumanitarnoe-pravilo/> (accessed: 02.03.2023)

<sup>1112</sup> Briefing with a Senior Administration Official // U.S. Department of State. June 16, 2021. URL: <https://www.state.gov/briefing-with-a-senior-state-administration-official/> (accessed: 02.03.2023)

<sup>1113</sup> Department Press Briefing – July 6, 2021 // U.S. Department of State. July 6, 2021. URL: <https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-july-6-2021/> (accessed: 02.03.2023)

<sup>1114</sup> It is noteworthy that, speaking of the “weaponization” of humanitarian aid, which the United States has reproached the Syrian government for a very long time, Ned Price used the form “has weaponized”, i.e. a verb in the Past Perfect form, meaning that the one in relation to whom the verb is used has stopped doing it by now. Perhaps this is just a caveat, but in any case, it deserves attention.

<sup>1115</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 2585 (S/RES/2585). July 9, 2021. URL: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N21/186/75/PDF/N2118675.pdf> (accessed: 02.03.2023)

cooperation, which was confirmed in statements of both sides.<sup>1116</sup> However, the very next day, the State Department announced that the US would continue to struggle for the re-opening of previously closed border crossings.<sup>1117</sup>

Unfortunately, with the aggravation of US-Russian relations due to the situation in Ukraine, bilateral cooperation on the issue of humanitarian border crossings began to gradually go into oblivion. As early as January 2022, the Russian Permanent Mission to the UN reproached the United States for showing itself “unconvincing” in implementing the provisions of Resolution 2585, supporting HTS\*<sup>1118</sup> “at the expense of its taxpayers” “under the pretext of caring for the Syrians.”<sup>1119</sup> Russian diplomats wanted to point out that the record amounts of humanitarian support for the Syrians, which Washington is so proud of<sup>1120</sup>, ultimately benefit only the jihadists.

American policy regarding humanitarian aid to the Syrians has been somewhat inconsistent. In early March, members of the Syrian Contact Group issued a statement declaring the need for “re-authorization of cross-border delivery of humanitarian aid, which has no alternative”, but at the same time expressing support for “cross-line delivery of aid and early recovery projects consistent with the resolution 2585 of the United Nations Security Council.”<sup>1121</sup> Secretary of State Anthony Blinken took a similar position in May, stating that the US supports both cross-border and cross-line mechanisms, but at the same time noting that “cross-border mechanism has no replacement” and it should be “extended and expanded.”<sup>1122</sup>

However, the facts spoke otherwise. From July 2021 to July 2022, i.e., over the whole year, the imbalance between cross-border and cross-line deliveries has not actually changed. The number of trucks with humanitarian aid that entered the territory of the Idlib enclave from Türkiye was approaching seven thousand, while only five convoys of 70 vehicles were sent through the UN contact line. Thus, progress in the development of the cross-line mechanism, which was one of the conditions prescribed in resolution

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<sup>1116</sup> Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki, July 9, 2021 // The White House. July 9, 2021. URL: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2021/07/09/press-briefing-by-press-secretary-jen-psaki-july-9-2021/> (accessed: 02.03.2023); Nebenzya told about the turning point in the work of the UNSC (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. July 9, 2021. URL: <https://ria.ru/20210709/nebenzya-1740665425.html> (дата обращения: 02.03.2023)

<sup>1117</sup> Special Briefing with Jeffrey Prescott, Deputy to the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations // U.S. Department of State. July 10, 2021. URL: <https://www.state.gov/special-briefing-with-jeffrey-prescott-deputy-to-the-u-s-ambassador-to-the-united-nations-2/> (accessed: 02.03.2023)

<sup>1118</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>1119</sup> “Fact” Check Regarding US Activity at the United Nations // Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations. January 25, 2022. URL: [https://russiaun.ru/en/news/release\\_250122](https://russiaun.ru/en/news/release_250122) (accessed: 13.04.2023)

<sup>1120</sup> U.S. Relations With Syria // U.S. Department of State. January 20, 2021. URL: <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-syria/> (accessed: 02.03.2023)

<sup>1121</sup> Joint Statement of the Syria Special Envoy Meeting // U.S. Department of State. March 3, 2022. URL: <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-of-the-syria-special-envoy-meeting/> (accessed: 02.03.2023)

<sup>1122</sup> U.S. Announces Additional Humanitarian Assistance for the Syria Crisis Response // U.S. Department of State. May 10, 2022. URL: <https://www.state.gov/u-s-announces-additional-humanitarian-assistance-for-the-syria-crisis-response-2/> (accessed: 02.03.2023)

2585, was not achieved.<sup>1123</sup> Moscow believed that there was every reason to attribute this to the Western and, in particular, American influence in the UN.

Despite the alleged desire by the United States to “not allow deep disagreements with Russia to stand in the way of delivering humanitarian assistance to the people of Syria,”<sup>1124</sup> the differences in the approaches of Moscow and Washington could not but lead to another struggle in the UNSC for the extension of the cross-border mechanism. On July 8, 2022, two draft resolutions were put forward for voting: the western one, prepared by the penholders of the process – Ireland and Norway, – providing for a standard extension of the cross-border mechanism for a year, and the Russian one, extending it by only half a year, and also providing for the fulfillment of tasks that the UN failed to cope with over the past year, including the further expansion of supplies across the line of contact.

US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield tried to present the vote against the Western draft resolution as a “vote against the cross-border mechanism” and a “death sentence”<sup>1125</sup> for Syrians living in the Idlib enclave, while accusing Russia of unfairly behavior towards the Syrians and the Security Council, and that it also “greedily and disrespectfully intercepts the negotiation process” from its penholders.<sup>1126</sup> In response to this, Deputy Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation Dmitry Polyansky noted that the speech of his American colleague could lead to a false impression that the Russian project does not at all provide for the extension of the cross-border mechanism, calling such actions “a blatant manifestation of political cynicism.”<sup>1127</sup>

Ultimately, on July 12, 2022, the Russian version of the resolution was nevertheless adopted, put to a vote by Ireland and Norway.<sup>1128</sup> US officials lashed out at Russia's actions with vehement criticism, even though the US eventually voted in favor of the resolution. According to them, the extension of the TGM for a year was only the “necessary minimum”, while Russia “took the Security Council

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<sup>1123</sup> *Khlebnikov A.* Russia's approach to the mechanism... (In Russ.). URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/podkhod-rossii-k-mekhanizmu-transgranichnoy-dostavki-pomoshchi-v-siriyu/> (accessed: 02.03.2023)

<sup>1124</sup> Department Press Briefing – June 6, 2022 // U.S. Department of State. June 6, 2022. URL: <https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-june-6-2022/> (accessed: 02.03.2023)

<sup>1125</sup> Remarks Before the Vote on an Ireland and Norway-Drafted UN Security Council Resolution Reauthorizing the UN Cross-Border Mechanism into Syria // U.S. Mission at the United Nations. July 8, 2022. URL: <https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-before-the-vote-on-an-ireland-and-norway-drafted-un-security-council-resolution-reauthorizing-the-un-cross-border-mechanism-into-syria/> (accessed: 02.03.2023)

<sup>1126</sup> Explanation of Vote Before the Vote on a Russia-Drafted UNSC Resolution Reauthorizing the UN Cross-Border Mechanism for Humanitarian Aid into Syria // U.S. Mission at the United Nations. July 8, 2022. URL: <https://usun.usmission.gov/explanation-of-vote-before-the-vote-on-a-russia-drafted-uns-council-resolution-reauthorizing-the-un-cross-border-mechanism-for-humanitarian-aid-into-syria/> (accessed: 02.03.2023)

<sup>1127</sup> Explanation of vote by Chargé d'Affaires... URL: <https://russiaun.ru/en/news/080722p> (accessed: 13.04.2023)

<sup>1128</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 2642 (S/RES/2642). July 12, 2022. URL: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/421/74/PDF/N2242174.pdf> (accessed: 02.03.2023)

hostage”<sup>1129</sup> and “abused its veto.”<sup>1130</sup> Russia, in response, accused the West of unwillingness to seek compromises and of an open desire to continue to politicize the purely humanitarian issues of providing comprehensive assistance to the Syrians.<sup>1131</sup> Curiously, almost half a year later, American representatives spoke out against the politicization of “something like this.”<sup>1132</sup>

Thus, the US position on humanitarian aid to the Syrians has also undergone some changes. The period of close cooperation with Russia and joint work on the text of UNSCR 2585 gave way to a violent confrontation against the backdrop of the Ukrainian crisis. However, given the true significance of the cross-border mechanism for the United States, which was designed not so much to help ordinary Syrians but as an artificial respiration apparatus for the Idlib enclave controlled by HTS\*<sup>1133</sup> terrorists, it is difficult to talk about the sincerity of the desire to work together with Russia in 2021. It is much more logical to say about it as a desire to delay as much as possible the long-awaited end of the civil war in Syria in the form of the final unification of the divided country.

#### 4.1.3. Syrian-Arab Rapprochement and the U.S. Response<sup>1134</sup>

One of the most serious diplomatic challenges for the United States regarding the Syrian conflict has become the gradual slide of the Middle Eastern countries towards normalization of relations with the Syrian government. Such moves by its own allies undermined US efforts to isolate the country.

Strictly speaking, the restoration of diplomatic and economic ties between Syria and the countries of the region began long before Biden came to the White House. The first sign in this regard was the reopening of the Egyptian embassy in Damascus in 2013, immediately after the overthrow of Islamist President Mohammed Morsi and the coming to power of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. However, this process began to become truly massive in 2018-2020. Then, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Türkiye, Iraq, Jordan, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Morocco, Tunisia and Sudan one way or another began to establish contacts with the Syrian Arab Republic. Some of them, for example, the United Arab Emirates, Oman and Bahrain, have reopened their embassies, while others have so far been limited to informal contacts

<sup>1129</sup> Explanation of Vote on a UN Security Council Resolution Reauthorizing the UN Cross-Border Mechanism for Humanitarian Aid into Syria // U.S. Mission at the United Nations. July 12, 2022. URL: <https://usun.usmission.gov/explanation-of-vote-on-a-un-security-council-resolution-reauthorizing-the-un-cross-border-mechanism-for-humanitarian-aid-into-syria/> (accessed: 01.03.2023)

<sup>1130</sup> Remarks at a UN General Assembly Meeting Following Russia’s Veto... URL: <https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-at-a-un-general-assembly-meeting-following-russias-veto-of-a-un-security-council-resolution-on-the-syria-cross-border-humanitarian-mechanism/> (accessed: 01.03.2023)

<sup>1131</sup> On the adoption of a UN Security Council resolution on international humanitarian assistance in Syria, including a cross-border mechanism (In Russ.) // Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations. July 14, 2022. URL: [https://russiaun.ru/ru/news/140722\\_tm](https://russiaun.ru/ru/news/140722_tm) (accessed: 13.04.2023)

<sup>1132</sup> Department Press Briefing – December 20, 2022 // U.S. Department of State. December 20, 2022. URL: <https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-december-20-2022/> (accessed: 02.03.2023)

<sup>1133</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>1134</sup> The section is based on the following article: *Yurk A.* Between Anger and Bargaining: The US Response to Syria's Return to the Arab World (In Russ.) // RIAC. May 31, 2023. URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/mezhdugnevom-i-torgom-reaktsiya-ssha-na-vozvrashchenie-sirii-v-arabskiy-mir/> (accessed: 06.06.2023)



through the secret services, military or diplomatic departments, as well as a demonstration of their readiness to return Syria to the Arab League.

The main motivators for such behavior differed. Jordan and Türkiye were primarily eager to bring back the hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees who weigh heavily on their economies. The Gulf monarchies sought to counteract Iranian influence as well as demonstrate a certain degree of independence from the US. The rest of the countries wanted to renew economic ties and also acted out of a sense of Arab solidarity.<sup>1135</sup> It should be noted that none of this would have been possible without one important circumstance – the widespread feeling that the United States “is no longer serious about Syria,”<sup>1136</sup> which gave the regional players a certain amount of leeway.

The first major event in a series of Arab-Syrian détente during the Biden presidency occurred in May 2021, when Saudi intelligence chief Khalid Humaidan visited Syria and met with President Assad. In the same month, a Syrian government delegation visited Riyadh for the first time during an international tourism conference. The United States reacted rather evasively to the Syrian-Saudi rapprochement, recognizing the Saudis' right to “do what they see as in the interests of their national security.” At the same time, the American spokesman added that “it is in their best interests not to engage with Assad.”<sup>1137</sup>

For some time now, the United States has been reacting rather vaguely to further attempts to bring the Middle Eastern countries closer to Syria. In most cases, State Department officials have stated that the United States do not “express any support for efforts to normalize relations or rehabilitate Mr. Assad,”<sup>1138</sup> even after such a rather large-scale incident as a visit to Damascus by UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan.<sup>1139</sup> The January visit to Damascus of his Omani counterpart was similarly commented – then the speaker of the State Department, Ned Price, only stated that “now is not the time for normalization.”<sup>1140</sup>

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<sup>1135</sup> See, e.g.: TIMEP Brief: Normalization of the Syrian Regime // The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy. May 13, 2019. URL: <https://timep.org/2019/05/13/timep-brief-normalization-of-the-syrian-regime/> (accessed: 03.03.2023); *Akhmedov V.* On the process of normalizing relations between Syria and the Arab states (In Russ.) // Middle Eastern Institute. October 11, 2021. URL: <http://www.iimes.ru/?p=80199> (accessed: 03.03.2023); *Randall D.* Syrian Thaw? Arab Normalization With Damascus Ahead of the Arab League Summit // Foreign Policy Research Institute. January 12, 2022. URL: <https://www.fpri.org/article/2022/01/syrian-thaw-arab-normalization-with-damascus-ahead-of-the-arab-league-summit/> (accessed: 03.03.2023)

<sup>1136</sup> *Lister C.* Amid efforts to normalize Assad's regime, the need for a new US Syria policy is clear // Middle East Institute. March 24, 2022. URL: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/amid-efforts-normalize-assads-regime-need-new-us-syria-policy-clear> (accessed: 03.03.2023)

<sup>1137</sup> *Ayton M.* ‘Times have changed’: Saudi Arabia-Syria in rapprochement talks // Al Jazeera. June 8, 2021. URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/8/times-have-changed-saudi-syria-in-rapprochement-talks> (accessed: 03.03.2023)

<sup>1138</sup> Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Israeli Alternate Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Yair Lapid and United Arab Emirates Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah Bin Zayed Al Nahyan at a Joint Press Availability // U.S. Department of State. October 13, 2021. URL: <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-and-israeli-alternate-prime-minister-and-foreign-minister-yair-lapid-and-united-arab-emirates-foreign-minister-sheikh-abdullah-bin-zayed-al-nahyan-at-a-joint-press-availab/> (accessed: 04.03.2023)

<sup>1139</sup> Department Press Briefing – November 9, 2021 // U.S. Department of State. November 9, 2021. URL: <https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-november-9-2021/> (accessed: 03.03.2023)

<sup>1140</sup> Department Press Briefing – January 31, 2022 // U.S. Department of State. January 31, 2022. URL: <https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-january-31-2022/> (accessed: 03.03.2023)

After the start of the special military operation in Ukraine, some interesting changes began to appear in American rhetoric. For the first time, they can be noted at a briefing on March 15, 2022, on the day of the 11th anniversary of the start of mass protests in Syria. Ned Price, speaking of this event, said that the United States “will not normalize relations with Assad *until and unless* there is irreversible progress towards that political solution.”<sup>1141</sup> This fact was immediately noticed by journalists, who pointed out that so far, the US has taken the position that Assad's days are numbered; now, de facto, the conditions for a possible normalization of relations were being voiced. Then the same wording was voiced at the May briefing on the lifting of sanctions from northeast Syria<sup>1142</sup>, which will be discussed in more detail below. There was an impression that Damascus was given some signals about Washington's readiness to make certain concessions.

Finally, it is important to note the case of Arab Gas Pipeline, which drags on since August 2021. According to the original plan, approved by the US government, Egypt was supposed to supply gas to Lebanon suffering from an energy crisis through the territory of Jordan and Syria. At the same time, Syria was to receive its share of Egyptian gas for participation in the project, as well as a fee for the right to transit gas through its territory. The situation was complicated by the fact that sanctions were imposed on the Syrian energy sector in accordance with the Caesar Act, but the US Ambassador to Lebanon, Dorothy Shea, promised that they could be weakened<sup>1143</sup>.

Despite this promise, an internal problem soon arose in the United States – Congress, where was a “strong bipartisan opposition to any pipeline scheme that would violate the sanctions under the Caesar Act.”<sup>1144</sup> Congressmen did not want the government in Damascus to receive any benefit from the “gas deal.” Under these conditions, Egypt was delaying gas supplies, asking Washington for confirmation that it would not be sanctioned for this under the authority of the Caesar Act<sup>1145</sup>. The American leadership thus found itself in a difficult situation: on the one hand, it sought to prevent further collapse of the Lebanese economy, which would lead to further strengthening of Iran and Hezbollah there; on the

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<sup>1141</sup> Department Press Briefing – March 15, 2022 // U.S. Department of State. March 15, 2022. URL: <https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-march-15-2022/> (accessed: 03.03.2023)

<sup>1142</sup> Special Briefing via Telephone with Ethan Goldrich, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Syria and the Levant, and Erik Woodhouse, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Counter Threat Finance and Sanctions, and Zehra Bell, Director for Iraq and Syria at the National Security Council // U.S. Department of State. May 13, 2022. URL: <https://www.state.gov/special-briefing-via-telephone-with-ethan-goldrich-deputy-assistant-secretary-of-state-for-syria-and-the-levant-and-erik-woodhouse-deputy-assistant-secretary-of-state-for-counter-threat-finance-and/> (accessed: 03.03.2023)

<sup>1143</sup> Lebanon's power problems: serious talk but no easy fixes // Al Jazeera. September 8, 2021. URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2021/9/8/lebanons-power-problems-serious-talk-but-no-easy-fixes> (accessed: 03.03.2023)

<sup>1144</sup> *Subbotin I.* Americans are not on the way... (In Russ.). URL: [https://www.ng.ru/world/2022-06-01/6\\_8450\\_sanctions.html](https://www.ng.ru/world/2022-06-01/6_8450_sanctions.html) (accessed: 03.03.2023)

<sup>1145</sup> *Mathews S.* Sending gas to Lebanon via Syria unlikely to violate sanctions: US official // Middle East Eye. October 18, 2022. URL: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/sending-gas-lebanon-syria-unlikely-to-violate-sanctions-senior-us-official-says> (accessed: 03.03.2023)

other hand, it was impossible to go against its own policy, moreover, having Congress in opposition. Thus, at the end of 2022, the story of the gas pipeline remained in limbo.

Summing up, we can say that the American reaction to the normalization of relations with the MENA countries was mainly limited to “infrequent warnings.”<sup>1146</sup> This situation of the absence of any sensitive punishment for what seemed unthinkable five or six years ago led to a change in the scope of a kind of Overton window. The US was no longer in a position to forbid its Middle Eastern “so-far” allies from taking independent foreign policy steps. Any delays in the further development of normalization were in no way connected with the desire or unwillingness of the US administration to allow this: they depended either on internal opposition in Washington or on changes in the position of the countries themselves, which is most clearly seen in the example of Saudi Arabia, which put up its list of preconditions for a rapprochement with Damascus.<sup>1147</sup>

## **4.2. Direct Military and Proxy War Actions of the Biden Administration Regarding Syrian Conflict**

### **4.2.1. Continuation of the Third Phase of Operation Inherent Resolve in Syria (January 2021 – December 2022). Hunt for the Leaders of the Islamist Insurgency**

The fight against the remnants of the Islamic State\*<sup>1148</sup>, according to the representatives of the US State Department, remained the only goal of maintaining the American military presence in Syria<sup>1149</sup>. At the same time, General Michael Kurilla, chosen by President Biden to head CENTCOM, said during a US Senate hearing that the US military presence “supports a whole-of-government approach to achieve other strategic objectives in Syria, including countering Iran and Russia.”<sup>1150</sup> This fact clearly demonstrates the virtual absence of changes in the US approach to the fight against ISIS\*, which, for all its objective importance, still remained an excellent cover for continuing to confront its geopolitical opponents.

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<sup>1146</sup> *Makki D.* The UAE paves way for Syria’s return to the Arab fold, but plenty of hurdles remain // Middle East Institute. January 31, 2022. URL: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/uae-paves-way-syrias-return-arab-fold-plenty-hurdles-remain> (accessed: 03.03.2023)

<sup>1147</sup> Media: Saudi Arabia called the conditions for the resumption of ties with Syria (In Russ.) // TASS. February 26, 2023. URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/17142839> (accessed: 03.03.2023)

<sup>1148</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>1149</sup> Briefing on the Secretary’s Upcoming Participation in the Meeting on Syria, The D-ISIS\* Ministerial, and the G20 // U.S. Department of State. June 25, 2021. URL: <https://www.state.gov/briefing-with-acting-assistant-secretary-for-near-east-affairs-joeey-hood-acting-director-of-the-office-of-the-global-coalition-to-defeat-isis-patrick-worman-and-office-of-monetary-affairs-dire/> (accessed: 07.03.2023)

<sup>1150</sup> Advance Policy Questions for Lieutenant General Michael E. Kurilla, USA Nominee to be Commander, United States Central Command // United States Senate Committee on Armed Services. February 8, 2022. URL: <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Kurilla%20APQ%20responses.pdf> (accessed: 07.03.2023)

Despite this, the US continued to actively engage with its SDF allies in the “enduring defeat of ISIS\*<sup>1151</sup>.” Although the number of airstrikes carried out by the Coalition against ISIS\* in 2021 has decreased markedly (from 4-6 to 2-3 per month), the number of operations carried out by the SDF with the support of the Coalition has remained at about the same level.<sup>1152</sup>

The situation changed after the events of January 2022, when ISIS\* attempted to raid a prison in the city of Al-Hasakah, where more than 3,500 former ISIS\* members were held, and several hundreds of them managed to escape.<sup>1153</sup> The United States immediately presented this event as emphasizing the importance of continuing efforts to combat ISIS\*, as well as the need for the speedy repatriation of militants held in prisons and their families to their homeland.<sup>1154</sup> The American side also stated that the raid had been in preparation for over a year, which later raised questions about why no one took early action in this case.<sup>1155</sup> As a working version, it can be assumed that the attack was allowed to take place in order to obtain powerful leverage on countries refusing to repatriate terrorists.

One way or another, in 2022, the United States significantly stepped up its efforts to combat the Islamist underground network in Syria. The biggest success of this series was the liquidation of the Islamic State\* leader, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi al-Qurashi, on the territory of the Idlib enclave on February 3. According to President Biden, this operation was “a testament to America’s reach and capability to take out terrorist threats no matter where they try to hide anywhere in the world.”<sup>1156</sup>

Then, in June 2022, in two successive operations, Hani Ahmed al-Kurdi, one of the top leaders and coordinators of ISIS\* in Syria, was captured.<sup>1157</sup>, and Abu Hamza al-Yemeni, one of the leaders of the Al-Qaeda\*-affiliated group Hurras al-Din, was killed.<sup>1158</sup> A couple of weeks later, the leader of ISIS\* in Syria, Maher al-Agal, was eliminated, which, according to Biden, sent “a powerful message to all

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<sup>1151</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>1152</sup> Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve | Quarterly Report to the United States Congress | October 1, 2021– December 31, 2021 // Office of Inspector General, U.S. Department of State. February 2022. P. 72-74. URL: [https://www.stateoig.gov/uploads/report/report\\_pdf\\_file/q1fy2022\\_leadig\\_oir\\_508.pdf](https://www.stateoig.gov/uploads/report/report_pdf_file/q1fy2022_leadig_oir_508.pdf) (accessed: 21.03.2023)

<sup>1153</sup> *Hassan M., al-Ahmed S.* A closer look at the ISIS\* attack on Syria’s al-Sina Prison // Middle East Institute. February 14, 2022. URL: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/closer-look-isis-attack-syrias-al-sina-prison> (accessed: 07.03.2023)

<sup>1154</sup> ISIS\* Attacks in Syria // U.S. Department of State. January 22, 2022. URL: <https://www.state.gov/isis-attacks-in-syria/prison> (accessed: 07.03.2023); Resolving the Detainee Dilemma: What Next for the Men, Women & Children of the Islamic State\* // U.S. Department of State. July 13, 2022. URL: <https://www.state.gov/resolving-the-detainee-dilemma-what-next-for-the-men-women-children-of-the-islamic-state-2/> (accessed: 07.03.2023)

<sup>1155</sup> Department Press Briefing – August 18, 2022 // U.S. Department of State. August 18, 2022. URL: <https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-august-18-2022/> (accessed: 07.03.2023)

<sup>1156</sup> Remarks by President Biden on a Successful Counterterrorism Operation // The White House. February 3, 2022. URL: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/02/03/remarks-by-president-biden-on-a-successful-counterterrorism-operation/> (accessed: 07.03.2023)

<sup>1157</sup> Officials identify detained senior ISIS\* leader // U.S. Central Command. June 16, 2022. URL: <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/News-Article-View/Article/3065554/officials-identify-detained-senior-isis-leader/> (accessed: 07.03.2023)

<sup>1158</sup> Strike conducted in Syria // U.S. Central Command. June 27, 2022. URL: <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/3076041/strike-conducted-in-syria/> (accessed: 07.03.2023)

terrorists who threaten our homeland and our interests around the world.”<sup>1159</sup> In the fall-winter of 2022, the American military, with the support of the SDF, eliminated or captured several other less high-ranking members of the ISIS\*<sup>1160</sup>. Thus, the success of the United States in this area is not in doubt.

However, the situation was overshadowed by many other factors. The situation remained deplorable in the two largest refugee camps in the territory controlled by pro-American forces – al-Hawl and Rukban. The first camp was located in the territory controlled by the SDF, and it contained mainly family members of former Islamic State\* jihadists. The second camp, which we mentioned earlier, was located within the 55-kilometer zone around the US base at al-Tanf, controlled by militants from the Jaish Maghaweir al-Thowra group, and it contained mainly refugees.

Despite some differences, the situation in both camps was similar and approached a humanitarian catastrophe. Al-Hawl was crowded (more than 50 thousand people), and the jihadi underground network was actively recruiting new members there. The SDF regularly carried out cleansing operations in the camp<sup>1161</sup>, but this was not enough – more than 60% of the camp’s population sympathized with the Islamic State\* in one way or another.<sup>1162</sup> The United States has repeatedly called for the repatriation of people held in the camp, but other countries were extremely reluctant to do so.

The situation with Rukban has not undergone major changes compared to the Trump presidency. The United States accused Syria and Russia of preventing UN humanitarian convoys from being sent to the camp<sup>1163</sup>; Russian representatives accused the United States of obstructing the disbanding of the camp and of wanting to use UN humanitarian aid to supply militants under their control.<sup>1164</sup>

Another inconvenient factor for the United States is civilian casualties as a result of US airstrikes. Under Biden, a number of such cases have come to light, including several from the times of a previous administration.

The first story that thundered was in March 2019 during the battle for the last town controlled by the Islamic State\* – Baghuz. The American F-15E fighter, according to reporters, deliberately dropped

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<sup>1159</sup> Statement by President Biden on Successful Counterterrorism Operation // The White House. July 12, 2022. URL: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/07/12/statement-by-president-biden-on-successful-counterterrorism-operation/> (accessed: 07.03.2023)

<sup>1160</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>1161</sup> See: *Rosen K.* Addressing the Humanitarian and Security Crises in Al-Hawl // The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. April 8, 2021. URL: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/addressing-humanitarian-and-security-crises-al-hawl> (accessed: 07.03.2023); Statement regarding Syrian Democratic Forces security operation in al-Hol camp // U.S. Central Command. September 18, 2022. URL: <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/STATEMENTS/Statements-View/Article/3161976/statement-regarding-syrian-democratic-forces-security-operation-in-al-hol-camp/> (accessed: 07.03.2023)

<sup>1162</sup> Inside the Syrian refugee camp where supplies are low and ISIS\* fears run high // NBC News. November 23, 2022. URL: <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/syrian-refugee-camp-supplies-are-low-isis-fears-run-high-rcna58288> \* (accessed: 07.03.2023)

<sup>1163</sup> Syria 2021 Human Rights Report // U.S. Department of State. April 12, 2022. P. 53. URL: [https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/313615\\_SYRIA-2021-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf](https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/313615_SYRIA-2021-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf) (accessed: 07.03.2023)

<sup>1164</sup> Statement of the Joint Coordination Headquarters... URL: [https://eng.mil.ru/en/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=12346644@egNews](https://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12346644@egNews) (accessed: 04.04.2023)

bombs on women and children, which led to the death of more than 70 people, but the incident was deliberately hidden even from the higher command<sup>1165</sup>.

The following month, several resonant materials were released at once. According to one of them, from 2014 to 2019, a special group called Talon Anvil of about 20 people operated in Syria. It coordinated American airstrikes, but frankly neglected precautionary measures, trying to strike as quickly as possible. Numerous civilian deaths have been caused by the group's actions<sup>1166</sup>. In another series of articles, it was alleged that the Pentagon deliberately underestimated the number of civilian casualties during strikes against ISIS\*<sup>1167</sup>, resulting in hundreds of deaths unaccounted for. It was noted that the command rarely ordered additional investigations, and reports of civilian casualties were rejected, allegedly due to insufficient evidence<sup>1168</sup>.

Finally, 13 civilians, including six children, died during the operation to eliminate ISIS\* leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi al-Qurashi. It was noted that some of the victims died as a result of a rocket hit on the second floor of the building in which al-Qurashi was hiding<sup>1169</sup>, and it is also unknown who actually set off the explosive device, allegedly activated by the ISIS\* leader himself<sup>1170</sup>.

The reaction of the Pentagon to the accusations was quite interesting. In May 2022, the Department of Defense released a report on the results of an “independent investigation” of the Baghuz incident led by US Army Forces Command (FORSCOM) Commanding General Michael Garrett<sup>1171</sup>. Not surprisingly, it was concluded that the American military personnel involved in that incident acted in accordance with the laws of war and without malice<sup>1172</sup>. In addition, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin decided not to punish anyone following the incident, which caused a strong reaction among American

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<sup>1165</sup> *Philipps D., Schmitt E.* How the U.S. Hid an Airstrike That Killed Dozens of Civilians in Syria // The New York Times. November 13, 2021. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/13/us/us-airstrikes-civilian-deaths.html> (accessed: 07.03.2023)

<sup>1166</sup> *Philipps D., Schmitt E., Mazzetti M.* Civilian Deaths Mounted as Secret Unit Pounded ISIS\* // The New York Times. December 12, 2021. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/12/us/civilian-deaths-war-isis.html> \* (accessed: 07.03.2023)

<sup>1167</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>1168</sup> *Khan A.* Hidden Pentagon Records Reveal Patterns of Failure in Deadly Airstrikes // The New York Times. December 18, 2021. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/12/18/us/airstrikes-pentagon-records-civilian-deaths.html> (accessed: 07.03.2023); *Khan A.* The Human Toll of America's Air Wars // The New York Times. December 19, 2021. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/19/magazine/victims-airstrikes-middle-east-civilians.html> (accessed: 07.03.2023)

<sup>1169</sup> 13 people killed in Syria in US operation to kill IS\* leader (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. February 3, 2022. URL: <https://ria.ru/20220203/siriya-1770937756.html> (accessed: 07.03.2023)

<sup>1170</sup> *Nezhat O., Dadouch S., Fahim K., Sohyun Lee J.* At least five children were killed during U.S. raid on ISIS\* leader, according to witnesses and video // The Washington Post. February 10, 2022. URL: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/10/syria-isis-raid-civilian-casualties/> \* (accessed: 07.03.2023)

<sup>1171</sup> It is difficult to agree with the characterization of the conducted investigation as “independent”. In fact, the investigation was carried out “army against army”, i.e. not even the Judge Advocate General's Corps or the Office of the Inspector General. The only argument in favor of the “independence” of the ongoing investigation was the fact that none of those conducting it took part in this operation under investigation. However, given the powerful factor of mutual cover-up prevailing in the American army, there is every reason to believe that the investigation was very far from objectivity.

<sup>1172</sup> Executive Summary: Independent Review of 18 March 2019 Civilian Casualty Incident in Baghuz, Syria // U.S. Department of Defense. May 17, 2022. URL: <https://media.defense.gov/2022/May/17/2002999192/-1/-1/1/EXECUTIVE-SUMMARY-INDEPENDENT-REVIEW-OF-18-MARCH-2019-CIVILIAN-CASUALTY-INCIDENT-IN-BAGHUZ-SYRIA.PDF> (accessed: 07.03.2023)

journalists. Pentagon spokesman John Kirby found nothing better than to resort to anti-Russian arguments, saying that the US “takes the issue of civilian casualties seriously” and speaks about it publicly, unlike Russia<sup>1173</sup>.

Finally, the last unsightly factor in American policy to combat the Islamic State\*<sup>1174</sup> is ... cooperation with its members. Above, we have already noted multiple evidence of the recruitment of former ISIS\* fighters to serve in US-controlled groups in Syria. The situation has not changed under the new administration. Syrian sources have repeatedly reported that the United States is taking former jihadists from the prisons where they were held after the defeat of ISIS\* to their bases, where they train and prepare for attacks on Syrian government facilities.<sup>1175</sup>

Based on the foregoing, we can conclude that the Operation Inherent Resolve was implemented in Syria quite pragmatically. The US military and its allies undoubtedly fought the Islamist underground, but this struggle was carried out with rather dirty methods and was accompanied by numerous collateral damages, and not at all “to the end”, despite loud statements from Washington. The preservation of jihadist sleeper cells helped to prolong the American illegal military presence in the country, while former jihadists were actively recruited into the SDF and “revolutionary commandos.”

#### **4.2.2. Syria as an Arena of U.S.-Iranian and U.S.-Russian Geopolitical Confrontation**

As we mentioned at the beginning of the previous paragraph, the main goal of the US military presence in Syria under Biden has not changed significantly since the Trump’s presidency – the United States continued to play an active geopolitical game in Syria with Iran and Russia. However, in relation to each country, this game was conducted in its own way, in different directions and with varying degrees of intensity.

Let us first consider the US-Iranian confrontation, in relation to which, compared to the previous administration, there has been some rebalancing of motivators. Previously, the key reason for containing Iranian influence in Syria was the need to guard the interests of Israel, the closest US ally in the Middle East, which under Trump was completely exaggerated to such an extent that it was impossible to distinguish Israeli and US interests.

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<sup>1173</sup> Pentagon Press Secretary John F. Kirby Holds a Press Briefing // U.S. Department of Defense. May 17, 2022. URL: <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/3034995/pentagon-press-secretary-john-f-kirby-holds-a-press-briefing/> (accessed: 07.03.2023)

<sup>1174</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>1175</sup> See: Media: US transported ten IS\* militants from an illegal base in Syria (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. February 28, 2021. URL: <https://ria.ru/20210228/ssha-1599313484.html> (accessed: 07.03.2023); The United States transported IS\* terrorists to its base in Syria, media reported (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. March 31, 2021. URL: <https://ria.ru/20210331/siriya-1603595846.html> (accessed: 07.03.2023); Media: the US military delivered a group of fighters to a base in Syria (In Russ.) // TASS. June 20, 2021. URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/11700257> (accessed: 07.03.2023); SANA: US moved 40 IS\* fighters from prisons to its base in Syria (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. August 7, 2021. URL: <https://ria.ru/20210807/boeviki-1744785869.html> (accessed: 07.03.2023); US military trains militants for Palmyra attack, Syria says (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. April 10, 2022. URL: <https://ria.ru/20220410/siriya-1782785009.html> (accessed: 07.03.2023)

However, under Biden, the picture has changed somewhat. The desire of the new administration to return to the Iranian nuclear deal, from which Trump pompously withdrew in 2018, as well as some cooling of relations with Israel<sup>1176</sup> and the first attempts of Iranian-Saudi normalization<sup>1177</sup>, led if not to a change in priorities, then at least to balancing them. Despite the fact that the US “commitment to Israel remains ironclad”<sup>1178</sup>, now the confrontation between Washington and Tehran proceeded not only and not so much from the need of the former to defend the interests of Tel Aviv, but from the need to protect their own interests, as well as to demonstrate toughness in order to achieve more favorable conditions for returning to the JCPOA.

This demonstration of toughness has resulted in dozens of missile strikes and drone attacks on US bases in northeast and southeast Syria. In turn, the United States did not disregard such attacks, striking back at pro-Iranian groups in Syria. The first such a strike was delivered as early as February 2021, nearly a month after Biden took office. The next strike followed a few months later, in June 2021. The third major attack to Iranian positions in Syria took place more than a year later, in August 2022.

In all three cases, the results of the strikes were not officially connected with the need to somehow influence Tehran's position on the nuclear deal. In February, Biden explained that the purpose of the strikes was to show Iran that it “cannot act with impunity.”<sup>1179</sup> In June, the Pentagon said the President was keen to demonstrate “that he will act to protect U.S. personnel.”<sup>1180</sup> It was not until August 2022 that Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl, among other things, tried to convince the press that the exchanges of blows and the negotiations on the JCPOA were in no way connected. According to him, Iran’s “moves back into compliance with the JCPOA” is in the interests of the United States, but “whether the JCPOA is reborn or not, it actually has nothing to do with our willingness and resolve to

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<sup>1176</sup> See: *Gearan A.* Biden’s relationship with Israel shaping up to be less cozy than his predecessors’ // The Washington Post. April 17, 2021. URL: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/biden-israel-relations/2021/04/17/5d97dd58-9d31-11eb-b7a8-014b14aeb9e4\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/biden-israel-relations/2021/04/17/5d97dd58-9d31-11eb-b7a8-014b14aeb9e4_story.html) (accessed: 09.03.2023); *Harkov L.* Most Israelis think Biden is worse for Israel than Trump was – poll // The Jerusalem Post. October 20, 2021. URL: <https://www.jpost.com/american-politics/most-israelis-think-biden-is-worse-for-israel-than-trump-was-poll-682518> (accessed: 09.03.2023); *Serhan Y.* The Once 'Unbreakable' U.S.-Israel Bond Is Under Strain // Time. January 30, 2023. URL: <https://time.com/6251298/blinken-israel-visit-us-tensions/> (accessed: 09.03.2023)

<sup>1177</sup> See: *Alhasan H.* The fragile diplomacy of Saudi–Iranian de-escalation // The International Institute for Strategic Studies. December 7, 2021. URL: <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2021/12/the-fragile-diplomacy-of-saudi-iranian-de-escalation> (accessed: 09.03.2023); *England A.* Iran’s foreign minister holds ‘friendly talks’ with Saudi Arabia // Financial Times. December 21, 2022. URL: <https://www.ft.com/content/beff5178-f8c7-4172-b121-f4d6356f7d16> (accessed: 09.03.2023)

<sup>1178</sup> National Security Challenges and U.S. Military Activities in the Greater Middle East and North Africa // United States House of Representatives Committee on Armed Services. April 20, 2021. P. 11. URL: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-117hhr47210/pdf/CHRG-117hhr47210.pdf> (accessed: 09.03.2023)

<sup>1179</sup> Iran 'can't act with impunity,' Biden says after U.S. air strikes // Reuters. February 27, 2021. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/usa-biden-iran-int-idUSKBN2AQ31T> (accessed: 09.03.2023)

<sup>1180</sup> Statement by the Department of Defense // U.S. Department of Defense. June 27, 2021. URL: <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/2672875/statement-by-the-department-of-defense/> (accessed: 09.03.2023)



defend ourselves.” Moreover, Kahl stated that “the strike last night was a pretty clear communication to the Iranians, that these things are on different tracks.”<sup>1181</sup>

However, if one looks closely at the dates when the American “retaliation strikes” were carried out, it can be noted that they quite clearly rhyme with the course of the negotiation process to return to the JCPOA. The February strike came a few days after official Tehran announced that negotiations could begin after the United States took the first step and lifted sanctions.<sup>1182</sup> The June strike came ten days after the presidential election in Iran, which was won by conservative Ibrahim Raisi, who was considered in the West to be less able to negotiate than his predecessor Hassan Rouhani, and, despite his tendency to continue negotiations on returning to the terms of the JCPOA, took a tougher stance on it.<sup>1183</sup>

In the case of the August strikes, the Israeli factor did also intervene in the complex equation of the US-Iranian negotiations. Tel Aviv, which was extremely opposed to the JCPOA, was dissatisfied with the significant successes achieved during the negotiations in Vienna.<sup>1184</sup> So it is likely that the words of Colin Kahl, as well as the attacks on Iranian positions in Syria, were intended to convince, first of all, the Israeli leadership.

It is also worth noting here that, despite a noticeable cooling in US-Israeli relations, close interaction between them continued, including on the Syrian issue. The depth of this bilateral engagement is evidenced by the Pentagon and CENTCOM approval scheme disclosed in June 2022 for IAF strikes against Iranian targets in Syria. The US military, while not directly assigning targets to Israeli pilots, coordinated the vast majority of their strikes.<sup>1185</sup> However, the secrecy with which this operation was carried out did not help the United States to completely distance itself from the “shadow war” between Iran and Israel, since already in the fall of 2021 pro-Iranian proxies began to inflict their “retaliation strikes” on American military facilities in Syria.<sup>1186</sup>

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<sup>1181</sup> Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Dr. Colin Kahl Holds a Press Briefing on Security Assistance in Support of Ukraine // U.S. Department of Defense. August 24, 2022. URL: <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/3138872/undersecretary-of-defense-for-policy-dr-colin-kahl-holds-a-press-briefing-on-se/> (accessed: 09.03.2023)

<sup>1182</sup> Zarif urges unconditional lifting of all sanctions as US retreats from some anti-Iran steps // PressTV. February 19, 2021. URL: <https://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2021/02/19/645598/Zarif-urges-unconditional-lifting-all-sanctions> (accessed: 17.07.2023)

<sup>1183</sup> See: *Wintour P.* Raisi’s election victory raises difficulties as Iran nuclear deal talks resume // The Guardian. June 20, 2021. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/20/iran-nuclear-deal-talks-resume-after-ebrahim-raisi-election-as-president> (accessed: 09.03.2023); Iran’s Raisi backs nuclear talks, rules out meeting Biden // Reuters. June 21, 2021. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/irans-raisi-says-foreign-policy-wont-be-limited-by-nuclear-deal-2021-06-21/> (accessed: 09.03.2023)

<sup>1184</sup> *Ravid B.* U.S. tries to reassure Israel over possible Iran deal // Axios. August 20, 2022. URL: <https://www.axios.com/2022/08/20/iran-nuclear-deal-israel-biden-concessions> (accessed: 09.03.2023)

<sup>1185</sup> *Gordon M.* U.S. Secretly Reviews Israel’s Plans for Strikes Against Iranian Targets in Syria // The Wall Street Journal. June 16, 2022. URL: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-secretly-reviews-israels-plans-for-strikes-against-iranian-targets-in-syria-11655405162> (accessed: 09.03.2023)

<sup>1186</sup> *Schmitt E., Bergman R.* Strike on U.S. Base Was Iranian Response to Israeli Attack, Officials Say // The New York Times. November 18, 2021. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/18/world/middleeast/iran-drone-al-tanf-syria.html> (accessed: 09.03.2023)

A somewhat different picture was observed in the US-Russian confrontation in Syria during Biden presidency, which can almost traditionally for this study be divided into two parts. Year 2021 was marked by a rather constructive bilateral interaction. Diplomatic advances in the form of a successful extension of the humanitarian transition of Bab al-Hawa were reinforced by the successful operation of the deconfliction mechanism. According to the quarterly reports of the Inspector General of the US State Department, in the first six months, Russia “mainly adhered to the protocols,” although there were also violations of the deconfliction regime e.g., in the form of increasing the number of vehicles participating in patrols without prior notice to the American side. The reports also highlighted the desire “to compel the United States to withdraw its forces from northeastern Syria” as Russia's primary goal<sup>1187</sup>. Russia, in response to these claims, stated that the United States did not have the right to criticize its actions, since their soldiers are in Syria illegally<sup>1188</sup>, and also pointed to violations of the deconfliction regime by the American military<sup>1189</sup>.

However, the situation began to change. Already in the report for the fourth quarter of 2021, the Americans noted an increase in violations of the deconflicting regime on the Russian side (mainly on the ground), and also reported with some displeasure about the creation of a coordination center between the SDF, the Syrian government and Russia and also about holding joint exercises of the three<sup>1190</sup>. In addition, the Russian military began patrolling in the immediate vicinity of the demarcation line between the zones of responsibility of Russia and the Global Coalition, which was designed to “demonstrate the presence of Russian armed forces.”<sup>1191</sup>

After the start of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, bilateral relations in the context of the Syrian conflict changed quite gradually, but in several directions at once. The first and most popular topic that linked Syria with the Ukrainian events was reports about the possible use of Syrian conflict participants in the Donbass. The beginning of this was laid by the President of Russia Vladimir Putin, who in mid-March 2022 agreed with the idea of Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu about attracting 16,000 foreign volunteers to combat operations on the side of Russia, most of whom were from the Middle East<sup>1192</sup>. Washington quite reasonably considered that Syria was the main source of volunteers,

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<sup>1187</sup> Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve | Quarterly Report to the United States Congress | April 1, 2021 – June 30, 2021 // Office of Inspector General, U.S. Department of State. August 2021. P. 75. URL: [https://www.stateoig.gov/uploads/report/report\\_pdf\\_file/oir\\_q3\\_jun21\\_gold\\_508.pdf](https://www.stateoig.gov/uploads/report/report_pdf_file/oir_q3_jun21_gold_508.pdf) (accessed: 09.03.2023)

<sup>1188</sup> The Russian Embassy recalled the illegal US military presence in Syria (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. May 6, 2021. URL: <https://ria.ru/20210506/siriya-1731256061.html> (accessed: 09.03.2023)

<sup>1189</sup> The Russian military in Syria stopped a convoy of US equipment moving along an uncoordinated route (In Russ.) // TASS. May 13, 2021. URL: <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/11369555> (accessed: 09.03.2023)

<sup>1190</sup> Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve | Quarterly Report to the United States Congress | October 1, 2021 – December 31, 2021 // Office of Inspector General, U.S. Department of State. February 2022. P. 79. URL: [https://www.stateoig.gov/uploads/report/report\\_pdf\\_file/q1fy2022\\_leadig\\_oir\\_508.pdf](https://www.stateoig.gov/uploads/report/report_pdf_file/q1fy2022_leadig_oir_508.pdf) (accessed: 09.03.2023)

<sup>1191</sup> Russian military began patrolling the demarcation line in eastern Syria (In Russ.) // TASS. November 22, 2021. URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/12984943> accessed: 09.03.2023)

<sup>1192</sup> Putin agreed with the proposal to attract volunteers to Ukraine (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. March 11, 2022. URL: <https://ria.ru/20220311/putin-1777617355.html> (accessed: 09.03.2023)

hastening to respond to this. Thus, Pentagon Speaker John Kirby said that his department has not yet observed “an influx into Ukraine of foreign fighters hired or recruited by Russia,” but “continue to see an interest by Russia in doing just that.”<sup>1193</sup> His State Department colleague, Ned Price, took even tougher note on the matter.

Russia, in turn, eventually turned the discourse 180 degrees, accusing the United States of training and transferring Syrian jihadists to Ukraine, only this time to conduct hostilities on the side of official Kiev. For the first time such an assumption was made by Syrian Foreign Minister Bashar Jaafari, who noted that the United States constantly resorts to such tactics and has the necessary logistical capabilities for this.<sup>1194</sup> Then the official charge of transferring 60 ISIS\*<sup>1195</sup> militants from the al-Tanf base to Ukraine was put forward by the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service. It noted that the base has long turned into a “terrorist hub”, where mainly people from the Transcaucasus and Central Asian countries are trained.<sup>1196</sup> However, over time, the topic of using militants or volunteers from Syria in the Ukrainian conflict gradually faded away in the rhetoric of both sides.

Another direction that has undergone major changes, but has survived was the US-Russian deconfliction. Back in mid-March 2022, CENTCOM Commander General Frank MacKenzie spoke quite positively about the interaction with the Russian military men in Syria, noting that relations with them have always been “very, very professional” and that they “if we have a problem, they’ll always pick up the phone.” In addition, he noted that “we have no evidence that the Russians are intent on escalating anything in Syria. I think they probably have plans to do that... but they have not chosen to do so.”<sup>1197</sup> In addition, according to the report for the first quarter of 2022, the number of violations of the deconfliction regime by the Russian military has not changed significantly.<sup>1198</sup>

However, in April 2022, as mentioned above, CENTCOM changed its commander to General Michael Kurilla. It was he who, during his hearings in the US Senate, mentioned “countering Iran and Russia” as US strategic objectives in Syria. General Kurilla had an opportunity to demonstrate adherence to his statements already in June 2022, when, presumably in response to the death of a Russian soldier

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<sup>1193</sup> Pentagon Press Secretary John F. Kirby Holds a Press Briefing // U.S. Department of Defense. March 21, 2022. URL: <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2973449/pentagon-press-secretary-john-f-kirby-holds-a-press-briefing/> (accessed: 09.03.2023)

<sup>1194</sup> The United States may transfer terrorists from Syria to Ukraine, the country's Foreign Ministry said (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. March 1, 2022. URL: <https://ria.ru/20220301/terroristy-1775719088.html> (accessed: 09.03.2023)

<sup>1195</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>1196</sup> About the interaction of the United States... (In Russ.). URL: <http://www.svr.gov.ru/smi/2022/05/o-vzaimodeystvii-ssha-s-terroristicheskimi-gruppirovkami.htm> (accessed: 09.03.2023)

<sup>1197</sup> CENTCOM Commander Gen. Frank McKenzie Holds a Press Briefing, March 18, 2022 // U.S. Department of Defense. March 18, 2022. URL: <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2971495/centcom-commander-gen-frank-mckenzie-holds-a-press-briefing-march-18-2022/> (accessed: 09.03.2023)

<sup>1198</sup> Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve | Quarterly Report to the United States Congress | Jan. 1, 2022 – Mar. 31, 2022 // Office of Inspector General, U.S. Department of State. May 2022. P. 72. URL: [https://www.stateoig.gov/uploads/report/report\\_pdf\\_file/q2fy2022\\_leadig\\_oir\\_508.pdf](https://www.stateoig.gov/uploads/report/report_pdf_file/q2fy2022_leadig_oir_508.pdf) (accessed: 09.03.2023)

as a result of an ambush arranged by the Jaish Maghaweir al-Thowra group.<sup>1199</sup> Russian aircraft attacked the outskirts of the At-Tanf base. The Russian side notified its American counterparts 35 minutes before the strike, which was significantly more than the four or five minutes in which the United States notified Moscow of the February strikes on pro-Iranian groups in February 2021.<sup>1200</sup> However, the United States was extremely displeased with what had happened. General Kurilla, who arrived in person at the al-Tanf base a few days later, described the incident as “part of a wider attempt by U.S. adversaries to assert dominance in the region while betting that the United States will not mount a kinetic response.” In addition, the general called Russia's actions “provocative”, “escalatory”, as well as “unsafe and unprofessional.”<sup>1201</sup>

In the future, according to the American side, the number of Russian “violations of deconflicting procedures” increased every quarter. In particular, this concerned air incidents, namely, incidents with transport aircraft of the Russian Aerospace Forces, which “were rerouted through the At Tanf Zone due to Turkish airspace restrictions on Russian military.”<sup>1202</sup> Russia, in turn, responded with counter-charges of “illegal flights of unmanned aerial vehicles in strike equipment in the airspace of the SAR”, which Russian aircraft were forced to evade<sup>1203</sup>, as well as, in general, the illegal presence of the US military on Syrian soil.<sup>1204</sup> At the same time, even at the end of 2022, there was a place for manifestations of friendly relations between the Russian and American military in Syria.<sup>1205</sup>

Finally, the third direction was the drawing by the United States of certain parallels between Russia's actions in Syria and in Ukraine, which boils down to the traditional “dehumanization” of its adversary. This approach became widespread in both the speeches given by US officials such as Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and in the materials of American think-tanks and the media.

All of the above confirms the assumption that the United States actively used Syria primarily as a platform for demonstrating its power and capabilities to its geopolitical opponents, and it must be said that those answered them in the same way. In the US-Iranian confrontation, Syria assumed the role of a

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<sup>1199</sup> *Semenov K.* Attack on al-Tanf: Rumors about Russia's withdrawal from Syria are premature (In Russ.) // NEWS.ru. June 21, 2022. URL: <https://news-ru.turbopages.org/news.ru/s/near-east/udar-po-at-tanfu-sluhi-ob-uhode-rf-iz-sirii-prezhdevremenny/> (accessed: 09.03.2023)

<sup>1200</sup> Lavrov: The United States warned the Russian military about the strike on Syria a few minutes before it (In Russ.) // TASS. February 26, 2021. URL: <https://tass.ru/politika/10790905> (accessed: 09.03.2023)

<sup>1201</sup> *Demirjian K.* U.S. wrestles with Russian, Iranian provocations in the Middle East // The Washington Post. July 3, 2022. URL: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/07/03/us-military-russia-iran-syria/> (accessed: 09.03.2023)

<sup>1202</sup> Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve | Quarterly Report to the United States Congress | July 1, 2022 – September 30, 2022 // Office of Inspector General, U.S. Department of State. November 22. P. 55. URL: [https://www.stateoig.gov/uploads/report/report\\_pdf\\_file/oir\\_q4\\_sep22\\_gold\\_508.pdf](https://www.stateoig.gov/uploads/report/report_pdf_file/oir_q4_sep22_gold_508.pdf) (accessed: 09.03.2023)

<sup>1203</sup> Briefing by the Center for Warring Reconciliation and Refugee Control in the Syrian Arab Republic (October 4, 2022) (In Russ.) // Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation. October 4, 2022. URL: <https://syria.mil.ru/peacemaking/info/briefs/more.htm?id=12440487@egNews> (accessed: 09.03.2023)

<sup>1204</sup> The US contingent destabilizes the situation in Syria, said Lavrentiev (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. November 22, 2022. URL: <https://ria.ru/20221122/siriya-1833244182.html> (accessed: 09.03.2023)

<sup>1205</sup> *Souleiman D.* Russian, US troops in Syria share 'rare moment' of congeniality // Al-Monitor. October 10, 2022. URL: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/10/russian-us-troops-syria-share-rare-moment-congeniality> (accessed: 09.03.2023)

platform for both sides to demonstrate their readiness to defend their interests during negotiations to restore the nuclear deal. Israel has very often been involved in this process, both working in the interests of the United States, and seriously complicating the situation for them with its overly active actions. In the case of Russia, the exchange of strikes was more of an isolated exception than an established practice. Moscow and Washington worked quite constructively in the deconflicting mode, constantly testing each other's "red lines," while also actively using the Syrian case in mutual propaganda accusations.

#### 4.2.3. Further Evolution of the Kurdish Problem in U.S.-Turkish Relations

The problem of support by the United States of so-called Syrian Kurdistan and its impact on US-Turkish relations deserves a separate consideration. As can be seen from the previous chapters, this factor launched a kind of "chain reaction", provoking the purchase of Russian S-400 air defense systems by Türkiye, the creation of the Astana format, the exclusion of Türkiye from the F-35 program and the start of a campaign of US criticism of President Erdogan's policy towards the opposition<sup>1206</sup>. In addition, Türkiye carried out three military operations in northern Syria, controlled by the Democratic Union Party and the YPG, which was strongly disapproved of in Washington, officially explaining this as dissatisfaction with undermining the efforts of the Global Coalition to Counter the Islamic State\*<sup>1207</sup>.

With President Trump, Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan still managed to find a common ground, which resulted in a virtual "green light" for two of the three Turkish operations in northern Syria – Olive Branch and Peace Spring<sup>1208</sup>. However, it was much more difficult to come to an understanding with Trump's successor Joe Biden. The new American president, as already mentioned in Chapter 1, was an ardent supporter of Kurds, and also had a very negative attitude towards President Erdogan personally, publicly calling him an "autocrat."<sup>1209</sup>

For the first six months of Biden's presidency, US-Turkish relations were in some kind of limbo. There were both positive moments, such as the shutdown of the activities of the American oil company Delta Crescent in northeast Syria, which Türkiye had previously actively opposed<sup>1210</sup>, as well as negative ones, e.g., continuing accusations against Ankara of violating human rights<sup>1211</sup> and even the

<sup>1206</sup> *Taspınar Ö.* Syria, the Kurds and the End of the Turkish-American Alliance / *Balci B., Monceau N. (eds.)*. Turkey, Russia and Iran in the Middle East: Establishing a New Regional Order. Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. P. 229-230. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-030-80291-2

<sup>1207</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>1208</sup> *Yurk A.* Syrian factor in Turkey... (In Russ.). P. 22-25.

<sup>1209</sup> *Tokuy M.* Past friction between Biden and Erdoğan foreshadows future tensions // *Axios*. November 25, 2020. URL: <https://www.axios.com/2020/11/25/biden-calls-erdogan-autocrat-turkey-nato-allies> (accessed: 10.03.2023)

<sup>1210</sup> *Zaman A.* Biden administration poised to ax US oil company's waiver for Kurdish-led northeast Syria // *Al-Monitor*. May 21, 2021. URL: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/05/biden-administration-poised-ax-us-oil-companys-waiver-kurdish-led-northeast-syria> (accessed: 11.03.2023)

<sup>1211</sup> *Idiz S.* Turkey, US maintain dialogue of the deaf // *Al-Monitor*. February 24, 2021. URL: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/02/turkey-united-states-syria-s400-ypg-ties-to-get-worse.html> (accessed: 11.03.2023)

actual recognition of the Armenian genocide by the United States.<sup>1212</sup> The Pentagon also adhered to a dual policy, on the one hand, requesting from Congress a twofold increase in the number of trained and equipped personnel in Syria – up to 20 thousand people – and on the other hand, requesting a significantly smaller amount for this – only \$177 million.<sup>1213</sup> Against this background, the fears of the Syrian Kurds themselves are understandable, who expected the United States “to take a clear and firm position in relation to Türkiye.”<sup>1214</sup>

The situation could have been changed by the expected first personal meeting between Presidents Biden and Erdogan on the sidelines of the NATO summit in Brussels in June 2021. However, despite Turkish hopes, the leaders of the two countries failed to agree on any issue of bilateral relations important for Ankara. The Kurdish issue was no exception: Biden apparently refused to stop supporting the SDF and accordingly the YPG, which Erdogan took “with regret.”<sup>1215</sup>

After the actual failure of an attempt to negotiate with the United States (perhaps in exchange for creating tension for Russia near Idlib.<sup>1216</sup>), Türkiye turned... to Russia, which has repeatedly expressed its dissatisfaction with the US military presence in northeast Syria and accused the Americans of plundering the oil and agricultural resources of Transeuphratia. However, at a joint press conference with his Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, although he expressed dissatisfaction with “attempts are being made east of the Euphrates to promote separatist tendencies”, noted the need for the “final eradication of terrorism” in northwestern Syria, i.e. in the Idlib enclave, for which Türkiye was de facto responsible.<sup>1217</sup> Thus, Ankara did not find full support for its actions either from Moscow or Washington: each of them demanded reciprocal concessions.

However, in August 2021 an event occurred that seemed to give President Erdogan a carte blanche – the rapid retreat of the United States from Afghanistan, which riveted the whole world and, more importantly, American attention. In all likelihood, the Turkish leader expected to take advantage of this temporary confusion and conduct another, fourth military operation against the SDF, or at least use the

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<sup>1212</sup> Statement by President Joe Biden on Armenian Remembrance Day // The White House. April 24, 2021. URL: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/24/statement-by-president-joe-biden-on-armenian-remembrance-day/> (accessed: 11.03.2023)

<sup>1213</sup> Justification for FY 2022: Counter-Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)\* Train and Equip Fund (CTEF) // Office of the Secretary of Defense. May 2021. URL:

[https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2022/FY2022\\_CTEF\\_J-Book.pdf](https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2022/FY2022_CTEF_J-Book.pdf) (accessed: 31.03.2023) (with \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked)

<sup>1214</sup> *Saleh J.* Syrian Kurdish Concerns over Russian-Turkish Compromise in Syria // The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. April 29, 2021. URL: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/syrian-kurdish-concerns-over-russian-turkish-compromise-syria> (accessed: 11.03.2023)

<sup>1215</sup> *Zaman A.* Erdogan’s meeting with Biden more spin than substance // Al-Monitor. June 14, 2021. URL: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/06/erdogans-meeting-biden-more-spin-substance> (accessed: 11.03.2023)

<sup>1216</sup> *Tastekim F.* After gestures to US, Turkey turns to placating Russia // Al-Monitor. July 7, 2021. URL: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/07/after-gestures-us-turkey-turns-placating-russia> (accessed: 11.03.2023)

<sup>1217</sup> Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s remarks and answers to media questions at a joint news conference with Foreign Minister of Turkey Mevlut Cavusoglu following talks, Antalya, June 30, 2021 // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. June 30, 2021. URL: [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/1766981/](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1766981/) (accessed: 13.04.2023)

possibility of using force as an instrument of political blackmail. It is important to note that the US has repeatedly gave up on the Syrian Kurds, not daring to openly oppose its NATO ally.

One way or another, the situation on the line of contact between the Turkish army and the pro-Turkish armed groups (the so-called Syrian National Army, SNA) and the SDF was getting hotter. Skirmishes and the exchange of missile and artillery strikes became more frequent, the responsibility for which the parties laid on each other.<sup>1218</sup> The American side responded to this with the careful public gestures, such as an invitation of the Democratic Union Party leaders to the United States, extending the state of emergency in connection with the Türkiye's actions introduced under the E.O. 13894 during Operation Peace Spring.<sup>1219</sup>, as well as confirmation that 900 American troops would not be withdrawn from SDF-controlled territory.<sup>1220</sup> Even so, the US tried to soften the blow by condemning “cross-border attacks” against Türkiye, as well as emphasizing that Türkiye is an “important NATO ally” with which the US has “shared interests in any number of areas” and that Washington “will continue to consult with our ally Ankara on Syria policy.”<sup>1221</sup>

By mid-October, tensions were at their peak. On October 11, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu blamed the recent YPG attacks on Russia and the United States, which, according to Ankara, “are not keeping their promises” and did not ensure the withdrawal of the Kurds from the border with Türkiye to a depth of 30 km. He also reproached Washington for insincere condemnation of the attacks directed against the Turkish security forces, noting that the United States “supplies [Syrian Kurds] weapons, and then make a statement just for show.” Finally, Cavusoglu stated that Türkiye “will do what is necessary to ensure its security.”<sup>1222</sup>

At the end of October, on the sidelines of the G20 summit, the second personal meeting of Presidents Biden and Erdogan took place, and the day before, in Sochi, the Turkish leader met with Vladimir Putin. Shortly before this, it became known that Türkiye was preparing two military operations in Syria at once: one in the Tel Rifaat region, a small Kurdish enclave in the northwest, and the other in the region of the

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<sup>1218</sup> *Flock E.* Turkey Capitalizes on Afghanistan Distraction to Attack Kurdish Forces in Syria // Foreign Policy. September 20, 2021. URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/20/turkey-airstrikes-kurds-syria-ypj-ceasefire/> (accessed: 11.03.2023)

<sup>1219</sup> Letter to the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President of the Senate on the Continuation of the National Emergency with Respect to the Situation in and in Relation to Syria // The White House. October 7, 2021. URL: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/10/07/letter-to-the-speaker-of-the-house-of-representatives-and-the-president-of-the-senate-on-the-continuation-of-the-national-emergency-with-respect-to-the-situation-in-and-in-relation-to-syria/> (accessed: 11.03.2023)

<sup>1220</sup> *Copp T.* ‘There Will Be No Withdrawal’: Syrian Allies Say US Has Promised to Keep Some Troops There // Defense One. October 8, 2021. URL: <https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2021/10/there-will-be-no-withdrawal-syrian-allies-say-us-has-promised-keep-some-troops-there/185972/> (accessed: 11.03.2023)

<sup>1221</sup> Department Press Briefing – October 14, 2021 // U.S. Department of State. October 14, 2021. URL: <https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-october-14-2021/> (accessed: 11.03.2023)

<sup>1222</sup> Turkey says it will do “what is necessary” after Syria attacks // Reuters. October 13, 2021. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-says-it-will-do-what-is-necessary-after-syria-attacks-criticises-russia-2021-10-13/> (accessed: 11.03.2023)

cities of Qamishli and Hasakah in the northeast<sup>1223</sup>. Apparently, the Turkish leadership wanted to play on the contradictions between Russia and the United States, given that the enclave in Tel Rifaat was closer to the Russian sphere of influence and was important for the supply and security of Aleppo, and an attack on the northeast really jeopardized the fight against ISIS\*<sup>1224</sup>, because in this case the SDF would be forced to switch to repelling the Turkish offensive.

Ultimately, neither Russia nor the United States gave the green light to a new, albeit limited, Turkish operation in northern Syria. Moreover, both sides agreed upon a rare for those times interaction, when the Americans allowed Russia to use the Qamishli airbase to temporarily deploy Su-35S aircraft there in order to send a certain signal to Türkiye.<sup>1225</sup> As reported by SDF commander-in-chief Mazlumah Kobani, both Russia and the United States gave security guarantees to the Kurds. In particular, according to him, during a meeting on the sidelines of the G20 summit, President Biden told Erdogan that “the United States will not allow any attacks” on the SDF.<sup>1226</sup> In many ways, the US decision was connected with the same Afghanistan, but absolutely not in the way that Ankara imagined it. After withdrawing from Afghanistan, the US simply could not afford another major foreign policy defeat, especially with a repeat scenario in which the Americans abandon their local ally.<sup>1227</sup>

However, the temporary setback did not stop the Turkish leadership. During the winter-spring of 2021-2022 Türkiye continued to carry out sporadic strikes throughout Syrian Kurdistan<sup>1228</sup>, and launched Operation Claw-Lock in April against PKK-owned targets in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Closer to the summer, Ankara once again returned to the topic of conducting a new ground operation against the SDF. For the first time, President Erdogan spoke about this at the end of May 2022, naming the expansion of the 30-kilometer buffer zone along the Turkish-Syrian border and taking control of “areas that are centers of attacks to our country” as the goals of the possible operation<sup>1229</sup>, as well as the

<sup>1223</sup> Turkey prepares for two military operations in northern Syria, source says (In Russ.) // RIA Novosti. October 28, 2021. URL: <https://ria.ru/20211028/siriya-1756682432.html> (accessed: 11.03.2023)

<sup>1224</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>1225</sup> *Ozkizilcik O.* What does CENTCOM gain by helping Russia in Syria? // TRT World. November 3, 2021. URL: <https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/what-does-centcom-gain-by-helping-russia-in-syria-51302> (accessed: 11.03.2023)

<sup>1226</sup> *Zaman A.* Syrian Kurdish commander says Russia opposes further Turkish land grabs // Al-Monitor. November 9, 2021. URL: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/11/syria-kurdish-commander-assured-washington-turkey-wont-invade-again> (accessed: 11.03.2023)

<sup>1227</sup> *Yurk A.* “When you leave – you leave”: will the US withdraw its troops from Syria after Afghanistan? (In Russ.) // RIAC. January 18, 2022. URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/columns/sandbox/ukhodya-ukhodi-vyvedut-li-ssha-svoi-voyska-iz-sirii-vsled-za-afganistanom/> (accessed: 11.03.2023)

<sup>1228</sup> See: *Zaman A.* Turkey’s attack on Syrian Kurds aims to deepen intra-Kurdish rift // Al-Monitor. December 28, 2021. URL: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/12/turkeys-attack-syrian-kurds-aims-deepen-intra-kurdish-rift> (accessed: 11.03.2023); *Tastekin F.* Turkey aims to keep tensions high in northeast Syria through targeted killings // Al-Monitor. January 18, 2022. URL: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/01/turkey-aims-keep-tensions-high-northeast-syria-through-targeted-killings> (accessed: 11.03.2023); Turkish military launches strikes on Kurd targets in Iraq, Syria // Arab News. February 2, 2022. URL: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2017221/middle-east> (accessed: 11.03.2023); *Szuba J.* Turkey steps up attacks on Syria’s Kurds amid Iraq operation // Al-Monitor. April 22, 2022. URL: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/04/turkey-steps-attacks-syrias-kurds-amid-iraq-operation> (accessed: 11.03.2023)

<sup>1229</sup> Erdogan says Turkey to launch military operations on its southern borders // Reuters. May 23, 2022. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/erdogan-says-turkey-launch-military-operations-its-southern-borders-2022-05-23/> (accessed: 11.03.2023)



subsequent relocation of Syrian refugees there<sup>1230</sup>. Given the context of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, the Turkish leader was going to use this issue as a bargaining chip in negotiations on Finland and Sweden joining NATO and on the need to reduce ties with Moscow, as well as in order to score foreign policy points before the upcoming 2023 general elections.

Washington reacted very ambivalently to Ankara's next plan. State Department spokesman Ned Price noted that the US “recognizes Türkiye's legitimate security concerns on its border,” but expressed concern “that any new offensive would further undermine regional stability and would put at risk those hard-won gains in the campaign against ISIS\*<sup>1231</sup>.”<sup>1232</sup> In a similar vein a week later Under Secretary of Defense for Middle East Affairs Dana Stroul spoke, also adding that the Turkish invasion would undermine the security of SDF-guarded prisons that hold former ISIS\* fighters.<sup>1233</sup>

Such a position could not but excite the Syrian Kurds themselves, who felt that they can once again be abandoned. Under these conditions, they began to take certain steps towards rapprochement with Damascus, issuing a joint statement that in the event of a threat from Türkiye, government troops would come to help to the SDF. Despite the fact that the statement was perceived by the media as “a message to the United States, designed to put pressure on Türkiye,”<sup>1234</sup> this did not follow, and Ned Price repeated the already familiar old talking points.

At the end of July, shortly after the Astana format meeting, President Erdogan made a very loud statement in which he called on the United States to withdraw its troops from the eastern bank of the Euphrates in Syria, because they support “terrorist groups” there.<sup>1235</sup> A few days later, the second person in the SDF hierarchy, Salwa Yusuf, was killed by a Turkish drone strike. The reaction of the United States, namely CENTCOM, is indicative, which expressed condolences to the family and all Syrian Kurds, while without indicating the cause of the death of the female commander and her two colleagues.<sup>1236</sup> A similar situation occurred a month later, when again four girls were killed due to a Turkish drone strike on an educational camp, and following the incident, the State Department issued

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<sup>1230</sup> *Chulov M.* Turkey's plan to forcibly relocate Syrian refugees gains momentum // The Guardian. May 27, 2022. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/27/turkeys-plan-to-forcibly-relocate-syrian-refugees-gains-momentum> (accessed: 11.03.2023)

<sup>1231</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>1232</sup> Department Press Briefing – May 31, 2022 // U.S. Department of State. May 31, 2022. URL: <https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-may-31-2022/> (accessed: 11.03.2023)

<sup>1233</sup> *Zanotti J., Thomas C.* Turkey (Türkiye): Background and U.S. Relations // Congressional Research Service. January 9, 2023. P. 44. URL: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R41368> (accessed: 11.03.2023)

<sup>1234</sup> *Mroue B.* US-backed Syrian Kurds to turn to Damascus if Turkey attacks // Associated Press. June 7, 2022. URL: <https://apnews.com/article/recep-tayyip-erdogan-united-states-ankara-turkey-fa53c7f2a6c1b9f0f008c1d1d41aba0d> (accessed: 11.03.2023)

<sup>1235</sup> US forces must withdraw from east of Euphrates River in Syria: Türkiye // TRT World. July 20, 2022. URL: <https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/us-forces-must-withdraw-from-east-of-euphrates-river-in-syria-turkiye-59000> (accessed: 11.03.2023)

<sup>1236</sup> US denounces killing of SDF deputy commander by Turkey // Kurd Press. July 25, 2022. URL: <https://kurdpress.com/en/news/2758/US-denounces-killing-of-SDF-deputy-commander-by-Turkey/> (accessed: 11.03.2023)

the most neutral statement in which Türkiye was not even mentioned.<sup>1237</sup> Türkiye's numerous statements about the possibility of rapprochement between Ankara and Damascus were accompanied by the same silence. The impression was created that the United States simply did not dare to take any public steps in order not to provoke another unnecessary aggravation in bilateral relations.

The situation escalated sharply in November 2022 after the terrorist attack in the center of Istanbul, for which Ankara almost immediately blamed the Kurds. And although both the PKK and the YPG denied their involvement in the attack.<sup>1238</sup> Türkiye's reaction was immediate. Turkish Interior Minister Suleiman Soylu accused the US of being involved in the bombing, apparently through links to the YPG.<sup>1239</sup> These accusations, perceived by most analysts as nothing but an empty rhetoric, however, take on a different meaning in the context of the facts of Washington's transfer of large reinforcements from Iraq to the northeast of Syria shortly before the terrorist attack.<sup>1240</sup>, as well as the US decoding of plans to launch the Operation Claw-Sword, which began on November 20.<sup>1241</sup> As part of the operation, strikes were carried out on Kurdish positions both in Iraq and in Syria. The next day, President Erdogan declared that the operation "cannot be limited to an air campaign," adding that the military was calculating how many ground troops would need to be brought in.<sup>1242</sup>

The US official reaction to the Turkish operation was initially quite limited. The State Department issued a brief statement calling for "de-escalation in Syria to protect civilian life and support the common goal of defeating ISIS"<sup>1243</sup>.<sup>1244</sup> However, the situation changed when the next day the strike was carried out in the immediate vicinity of the US base in Hasakah. The State Department and the Pentagon issued statements indicating that "recent air strikes in Syria directly threatened the safety of U.S. personnel,"<sup>1245</sup> while reiterating that "Türkiye has legitimate security concerns regarding terrorism."<sup>1246</sup>

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<sup>1237</sup> De-escalation in Northern Syria // U.S. Department of State. August 22, 2022. URL: <https://www.state.gov/de-escalation-in-northern-syria/> (accessed: 11.03.2023)

<sup>1238</sup> *Michaelson R.* Kurdish militants deny Turkish claims they carried out Istanbul attack // The Guardian. November 14, 2022. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/14/pkk-denies-role-in-istanbul-bomb-attack-that-killed-six> (accessed: 11.03.2023)

<sup>1239</sup> *Dress B.* Turkey alleges US complicity in deadly Istanbul bombing, rejects condolence statement // The Hill. November 14, 2022. URL: <https://thehill.com/policy/international/3734308-turkey-alleges-us-complicity-in-deadly-istanbul-bombing-rejects-condolence-statement/> (accessed: 11.03.2023)

<sup>1240</sup> *Loginova K.* The strategy is unchanged... (In Russ.). URL: <https://iz.ru/1423706/kseniia-loginova/strategiia-neizmenna-amerikantcy-vnov-usilivaiutsia-v-sirii> (accessed: 12.03.2023)

<sup>1241</sup> Media: Turkish operation in Syria and Iraq took place a day earlier due to US intelligence (In Russ.) // TASS. November 21, 2022. URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/16383077> (accessed: 12.03.2023)

<sup>1242</sup> *Wilks A.* Erdogan says Turkey's strikes in Syria, Iraq may lead to ground offensive // Al-Monitor. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/11/erdogan-says-turkeys-strikes-syria-iraq-may-lead-ground-offensive> (accessed: 11.03.2023)

<sup>1243</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>1244</sup> Violence in Northern Syria, Northern Iraq, and Southern Turkey // U.S. Department of State. November 21, 2022. URL: <https://www.state.gov/violence-in-northern-syria-northern-iraq-and-southern-turkey/> (accessed: 11.03.2023)

<sup>1245</sup> DOD Statement on Escalating Actions in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey // U.S. Department of Defense. November 23, 2022. URL: <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3227725/dod-statement-on-escalating-actions-in-iraq-syria-and-turkey/> (accessed: 11.03.2023)

<sup>1246</sup> Encouraging De-escalation in Syria and Turkey // U.S. Department of State. November 23, 2022. URL: <https://www.state.gov/encouraging-de-escalation-in-syria-and-turkey/> (accessed: 11.03.2023)

Nevertheless, the Kurds remained dissatisfied with the actions of both the United States and Russia, and demanded “louder” anti-Turkish statements from them, especially against the backdrop of the evacuation of American civilian personnel to Iraqi Erbil.<sup>1247</sup> Both countries, however, have worked diligently to contain the impulses of the Turkish leadership. So, in response to the Turkish ultimatum on the withdrawal of the SDF from the cities of Manbij, Tel Rifaat and Kobani, the American side proposed that the Kurds in these cities be replaced by Arab units of the SDF. However, Türkiye responded by demanding that the SDF also gave up control of the oil fields as a precondition.<sup>1248</sup> Given Ankara's desire to seek common ground with Damascus, as well as the latter's desire to return its oil revenues, it is quite possible that this demand should have acted as a signal to Assad.

All this brings us to the confirmation of the previously expressed idea that the United States under the Biden administration, despite all the “anti-Erdogan” attitude, did not dare to take any critical public actions, which inevitably led to a further deterioration of bilateral relations and further drift of Ankara away from Washington, and certainly could not “recognize that Türkiye poses an existential threat” to the Syrian Kurds and that it is “an obstacle to peace in Syria.”<sup>1249</sup> Nevertheless, apparently, the shady steps taken by the United States played a much greater role in containing Erdogan's anti-Kurdish impulses, and ultimately made it possible to prevent another ground operation from being carried out either in 2021 or in 2022. Such obstinacy of the US had not only objective and systemic grounds, such as the need to continue the fight against ISIS\*<sup>1250</sup> or confrontation with Moscow and Tehran, but also subjective, domestic ones in the form of the inadmissibility of another foreign policy failure in the Middle East in the form of a rapid retreat, accompanied by indifference to the fate of their own recent local allies.

### 4.3. Biden Administration Sanctions Policy on Syria

At first glance, in the sanctions' field the Biden administration also pursued a rather ambiguous policy. On the one hand, Washington imposed new sanctions for a variety of reasons; on the other hand, it carried out repeated withdrawals from existing sanctions regimes. However, a closer look shows that the actions of the administration were quite systematic.

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<sup>1247</sup> *Zaman A.* Syrian Kurdish commander slams US response to Turkish attacks as US diplomats evacuated from Syria // Al-Monitor. November 29, 2022. URL: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/11/syrian-kurdish-commander-slams-us-response-turkish-attacks-us-diplomats-evacuated> (accessed: 11.03.2023)

<sup>1248</sup> *Tastekin F.* US, Russia stall Turkey's ground operation, but Kurdish gains under threat // Al-Monitor. December 15, 2022. URL: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/12/syrian-kurdish-gains-under-threat-russia-us-try-placate-turkey> (accessed: 11.03.2023)

<sup>1249</sup> *Manfredi Firmian F.* Strengthening the US Partnership with the Syrian Democratic Forces // Survival. 2021, Vol. 63, No. 6. P. 171. DOI: 10.1080/00396338.2021.2006456

<sup>1250</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

Let us first consider the newly imposed sanctions. The United States imposed the first sanctions on Syria at the end of July 2021, which marked a return to thing that, according to many in the “Washington swamp”, was so lacking under the previous administration – to the value component of US foreign policy. The sanctions targeted eight Syrian prisons, five Syrian officials associated with those prisons, and two paramilitary militias and their leaders who, according to US sources, were involved in massive human rights abuses. It is curious to note that one of these militias was not a pro-government Shia militia, but a Sunni opposition one. The pro-Turkish group Ahrar al-Sharqiya was notorious with the assassination of the Syrian Kurdish politician Hevrin Khalaf in October 2019, and also recruited former ISIS\*<sup>1251</sup> members.<sup>1252</sup> Apparently, such a step was also intended to serve as a signal for Türkiye.

The following sanctions imposed in connection with Syria were introduced in March 2022. They only indirectly affected Syria itself, since they were imposed against the Chinese company Zhengzhou Nanbei Instrument Equipment Co. Ltd for “supplying Syria with equipment controlled by the Australia Group chemical and biological weapons nonproliferation regime.”<sup>1253</sup>

These sanctions supposedly served as a prelude to the next, introduced exactly seven months later, in October 2022. This time, US officials decided to recall the nine-year-old-story and impose sanctions on three Syrian generals allegedly involved in a chemical attack in Eastern Ghouta in August 2013. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said they “denied the right to life of at least 1,400 people” and called on the Syrian government “to fully declare and destroy its chemical weapons program and provide immediate and unfettered access for the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons personnel in accordance with its international obligations.”<sup>1254</sup> The last requirement looks all the more strange, given that in 2013-2016 the United States personally took part in the operation to destroy Syrian chemical weapons.<sup>1255</sup>

At the same time, in a number of cases, Washington has weakened the previously imposed anti-Syrian sanctions. First, in June 2021, certain actions were allowed to assist Syria in overcoming the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic. Under a special license, certain operations and activities related to the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of COVID-19 were allowed. At the same time, it was

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<sup>1251</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>1252</sup> Imposing Sanctions in Defense of Human Rights in Syria // U.S. Department of State. July 28, 2021. URL: <https://www.state.gov/imposing-sanctions-in-defense-of-human-rights-in-syria/> (accessed: 06.03.2023)

<sup>1253</sup> New Sanctions Under the Iran, North Korea, and Syria Nonproliferation Act (INKSNA) // U.S. Department of State. March 24, 2022. URL: <https://www.state.gov/new-sanctions-under-the-iran-north-korea-and-syria-nonproliferation-act-inksna/> (accessed: 06.03.2023)

<sup>1254</sup> Designation of Three Syrian Military Officials Due to Involvement in Gross Violations of Human Rights // U.S. Department of State. October 24, 2022. URL: <https://www.state.gov/designation-of-three-syrian-military-officials-due-to-involvement-in-gross-violations-of-human-rights/> (accessed: 06.03.2023)

<sup>1255</sup> *Trapp R.* Elimination of the Chemical Weapons Stockpile of Syria // *Journal of Conflict & Security Law.* 2014, Vol. 19, No. 1. P. 7-23. DOI: 10.1093/jcsl/kru002

noted that the export or re-export of any goods, technologies or services to the army or intelligence of Syria is still prohibited.<sup>1256</sup>

This process was continued in November of the same year, and this time the US Department of the Treasury went much further. According to changes in the General License for NGOs, they were allowed the following activities: “new investment in Syria; the purchase of refined petroleum products of Syrian origin for use in Syria; and certain transactions with elements of the Government of Syria”. However, all these actions were to be strictly non-commercial in nature, and also aimed, among other things, at “democracy-building.” In addition, it was specifically emphasized that these actions were aimed solely at “alleviating the suffering of the Syrian people,” and that the US “continues to focus on deterring the malign activities of Bashar al-Assad, his regime, cronies, and foreign enablers... including by limiting their ability to access the international financial system and global supply chains.”<sup>1257</sup>

However, the most significant development in the field of Syria sanctions policy was the release by the US Treasury Department in May 2022 of General License 22 (GL 22), which “authorized specific economic activities in certain non-regime-held areas of northeast and northwest Syria.” This license allowed foreign private investment in all major sectors of the economy in the northern regions of the country. According to State Department officials, the move was solely aimed at “reducing the likelihood of ISIS’s<sup>1258</sup> resurgence by combatting the conditions that enable its recruitment efforts and its support networks”<sup>1259</sup> and was “not a political step, [but] an economic step” and did not in any way undermine the territorial integrity of Syria.<sup>1260</sup>

However, such explanations did not satisfy a number of external actors in the Syrian conflict. For obvious reasons, Türkiye opposed it. President Erdogan called the US actions unacceptable and “encouraging terrorists.”<sup>1261</sup> Russia also criticized GL 22, stating that the license “in fact, legalizes for Washington the theft of Syrian grain from the Euphrates.”<sup>1262</sup>

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<sup>1256</sup> Treasury Issues Additional COVID-19-related Sanctions Authorizations and Guidance // U.S. Department of the Treasury. June 17, 2021. URL: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0234> (accessed: 06.03.2023)

<sup>1257</sup> U.S. Treasury Expands Syria Nongovernmental Organizations General License // U.S. Department of the Treasury. November 24, 2021. URL: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0505> (accessed: 06.03.2023)

<sup>1258</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

<sup>1259</sup> Authorizing Specified Economic Activities in Non-Regime Held Areas of Northeast and Northwest Syria in Support of D-ISIS\* Efforts // U.S. Department of State. May 12, 2022. URL: <https://www.state.gov/authorizing-specified-economic-activities-in-non-regime-held-areas-of-northeast-and-northwest-syria-in-support-of-d-isis-efforts/> (accessed: 06.03.2023)

<sup>1260</sup> Special Briefing via Telephone with Ethan Goldrich... URL: <https://www.state.gov/special-briefing-via-telephone-with-ethan-goldrich-deputy-assistant-secretary-of-state-for-syria-and-the-levant-and-erik-woodhouse-deputy-assistant-secretary-of-state-for-counter-threat-finance-and/> (accessed: 03.03.2023)

<sup>1261</sup> Erdogan: US move to lift sanctions on YPG/PKK-controlled areas unacceptable // TRT World. May 13, 2022. URL: <https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/erdogan-us-move-to-lift-sanctions-on-ypg-pkk-controlled-areas-unacceptable-57113> (accessed: 06.03.2023)

<sup>1262</sup> Statement by First Deputy Permanent Representative Dmitry Polyanskiy at UNSC briefing on the humanitarian situation in Syria // Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations. May 20, 2022. URL: <https://russiaun.ru/en/news/200522p> (accessed: 14.04.2023)

Thus, the US sanctions policy towards Syria under Biden, despite its seeming multidirectional nature, actually consisted of a combination of demonstrative measures with further economic strangulation of the country's government-controlled territories.<sup>1263</sup> Minor exceptions to the sanctions, including for the “democracy-building” could not improve the humanitarian situation, which was extremely dependent on the full economic recovery of the country, which, in turn, was impossible due to the sanctions of the Caesar Act<sup>1264</sup>. The lifting of sanctions from the northeast and northwest of the country, despite all the statements of the American side, actually pursued a dual goal: to tear the rebellious regions even more economically and politically from the center, and also to create a visible alternative for Damascus.

### Chapter 4 Conclusions

The policy of the next US administration of President Joe Biden towards the Syrian conflict, judging by the campaign promises, was supposed to be a kind of “work on the mistakes” made by the Obama administration, where most of the high-ranking members of the new cabinet, especially its foreign policy wing, had worked. Their understanding of these “mistakes”, however, was quite peculiar: instead of admitting to actually fomenting a Syria Civil War by covertly supplying weapons to jihadist rebels and imposing unilateral sanctions on the Syrian government, they were worried that they “did too little”, i.e., not enough pressured on President Assad and his allies.

However, in reality Biden's Syrian policy turned out to be quite peaceful and restrained, at least in the first year of his presidency. This can be explained explained by objective reasons in the form of distraction to other matters, mainly to the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. In general, the White House has followed a fairly standard “Democratic” policy towards Syria. The position was toughened against Türkiye, which failed to conduct another military operation against the Syrian Kurds, whose support was important for the future plans of the United States. At the same time, as part of a small détente in US-Russian relations agreements were reached to extend the work of the humanitarian border crossings in northwestern Syria.

At the same time, the new administration's approach to the Syrian conflict reflected some of the methods of its predecessor. Thus, the exchange of strikes between the US military and pro-Iranian Shiite militias continued, designed to demonstrate the determination of both sides and to create a background for negotiations to restore the Iranian nuclear deal. In addition, in one of the areas the United States

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<sup>1263</sup> Lift ‘suffocating’ unilateral sanctions against Syrians, urges UN human rights expert // UN News. November 10, 2022. URL: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/11/1130427> (accessed: 06.03.2023)

<sup>1264</sup> *Mamedov R.* Syria: international humanitarian... (In Russ.). URL: <https://ru.valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/siriya-mezhdunarodnoe-gumanitarnoe-pravilo/> (accessed: 02.03.2023)

returned to the value factor of its foreign policy, for the first time in several years introducing new sanctions against Syrian officials in connection with the human rights violations.

The situation, however, changed dramatically with the start of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine in February 2022, which inevitably affected the situation in Syria, where the US and Russian military acted literally at arm's length. Both sides began to more openly, though still very cautiously, test each other's "red lines," which was vividly expressed in the June strike of the Russian Aerospace Forces on the At Tanf base. At the same time, attention should also be paid to Washington's very unambiguous steps towards the government in Damascus, hinting at the possibility of improving relations in exchange for the fulfillment of certain conditions, including by breaking up ties with Moscow.

Washington also failed to resolve other Syrian problems – the constant shelling of American bases by Shiite militias, which intensified against the backdrop of the ongoing Iranian-Israeli "shadow war"; Türkiye's ongoing attempts to establish a 30 km zone along the border by pushing the Kurds inland; as well as the ongoing "creeping normalization" of the Assad government's relations with the Arab world.

All of this thus allows us to compare the Biden administration's Syrian policy to a swinging pendulum<sup>1265</sup>. In 2021, this pendulum has swung towards diplomatic instruments, and in 2022 – towards military measures. At the same time, in general, the overall US strategy in Syria under Biden did not differ much from the approaches of the previous administration. In the minds of the members of the Biden team, quasi-strategic approaches still prevailed, consisting in the inadmissibility of the final victory of the Government of Syria and its Russian and Iranian allies and, accordingly, in the need to artificially maintain the viability of any forces capable of resisting them.

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<sup>1265</sup> *Yurk A.* The Syrian Policy of the Joe Biden Administration (In Russ.) // Russia and America in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. 2022. Special Issue. DOI: 10.18254/S207054760023964-7

## Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the policy of the three American administrations regarding the Syrian conflict, a number of common and specific features of its various directions can be identified.

On the *diplomatic front*, under all three administrations, the United States has sought to keep the Syrian peace process under their control in order to get what they considered as the “right” outcome – the removal of the government of Bashar al-Assad. Such a position was due to the systemic factor – the dominant position of Washington in the international arena obliged it to act, and the interests of the Middle Eastern allies set a certain vector for American actions.

Notwithstanding, some evolutionary changes in the attitude of the United States towards the peace process can be observed. If in 2011-2015 American diplomacy was the most active on this front, then since 2016 it began to lose the initiative. A vivid indicator of this process was the emergence of the so-called Astana format established by Russia, Iran and Türkiye. This trend has continued under both Trump and Biden administrations, with Washington increasingly distancing itself from the Syrian peace process while, by virtue of its position, retaining the metaphorical “majority share” and using it to block any initiatives leading to the unblocking of the process in direction opposite to the American interests.

It is also interesting to note a number of features found in the Syrian policy of all three administrations at once. Firstly, all three actively used informal diplomatic organizations aimed at actions bypassing traditional institutions, such as the UNSC – the Friends of Syria Group, the “small group” on Syria, the Syrian Contact Group. Secondly, even traditional international institutions have come under serious pressure from the United States and its Western allies – the story of the chemical attacks in Syria and the ensuing pressure on the OPCW are the best example of this. Thirdly, every president at some point came to the idea of the need to establish cooperation on the Syrian issue with the countries supporting Damascus, mainly with Russia. This idea came to Obama after the start of the Russian military operation against Islamic State\*<sup>1266</sup>, to Trump and Biden – at the beginning of their presidency, but in the end, none of the administrations succeeded in implementing this idea – the systemic contradictions between Washington and Moscow were too strong.

At the same time, each administration had its own peculiarities in the diplomatic approach towards the Syrian peace process. If the Obama administration was serious about achieving a political solution to the conflict, for which it was even ready to put some pressure on the “moderate opposition,” then the Trump administration, apparently, did not even seriously consider this option, preferring to act exclusively from a position of strength. As for the Biden team, it took some intermediate position, realizing that it would no longer be possible to achieve a settlement of the conflict on Western terms,

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<sup>1266</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.



however, showing a visible interest in diplomacy, at the same time using its failures to criticize their opponents.

In the matter of *interaction with powers whose interests were opposed to those of the United States*, the general approach of all administrations was the same – neither Obama, nor Trump, nor Biden were going to completely surrender their positions and give victory to Damascus and its allies. On a tactical level, however, each president has largely acted in his own way. Each administration's approach has depended heavily on the foreign policy agenda and priorities of the president and his team, and – particularly in the case of Trump – on domestic political dynamics within the United States.

Thus, the Obama administration aimed at relatively constructive engagement with Damascus-supporting Russia and Iran. In the case of Moscow, even the Crimean events of 2014 could not completely interrupt bilateral contacts on Syria within the framework of the Geneva peace process, and after the start of the Russian military operation in Syria, these contacts intensified even more, although receiving a serious blow as a result of the incident that occurred in September 2016 near Deir-ez-Zor. As for Tehran, both sides were seriously interested in achieving the so-called “nuclear deal,” and therefore, separated the Syrian and nuclear issues, yet still acted quite carefully, trying not to offend each other's direct interests. Much more interesting is the aggravation of US-Turkish relations that originated precisely in Syria due to the Kurdish factor, in relation to which the Obama administration took an ambivalent position, on the one hand, not wanting to lose a NATO ally, and on the other hand, realizing the importance of the Kurdish units as the only possible and combat-ready allies “on the ground.”

The advent of Donald Trump to the White House has somewhat changed Washington's position in all of the above areas. The new president intended to cooperate much more closely with Russia, to transfer the policy of “maximum pressure” on Iran into Syria as well, while on the issue of the Kurdish-Turkish confrontation he leaned more towards Ankara. However, in the end, the results of the “rebalancing” carried out turned out to be very blurry: it was not possible to establish interaction with Russia due to domestic political hysteria with “interference” in the 2016 US presidential elections; pressure on Iran only untied its hands, leading to unprecedented shelling of American military bases on territory of Syria, as well as the general strengthening of its military presence in the country; and Trump's numerous attempts to withdraw troops from northeast Syria and abandon the Kurds were more or less successfully neutralized by the Pentagon.

The Biden administration, as in the previous case, took an intermediate position. If in 2021 the White House made attempts to establish cooperation with Russia on Syria, as well as to return to the JCPOA, and for this purpose somewhat weakened the anti-Iranian rhetoric (though without stopping attacks on the positions of pro-Iranian groups in Syria), then in 2022 all these attempts came to an end, and US engagement with Russia and Iran in the Syrian conflict began to resemble Trump's policies much more than Obama's ones. The only exception was relations with Türkiye – Ankara’s attempts to conduct a new

operation in northeastern Syria failed in 2021 as well as in 2022, and both because of external (negative consequences of leaving Afghanistan) and internal (poor relations between Presidents Biden and Erdogan) factors. Much more interesting is the interaction of the United States under Biden with the Arab monarchies, slowly but surely restoring relations with the disgraced Damascus – apart from gently scolding Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Amman, the White House did not dare to do anything else: relations with them were too important for the whole of the U.S. Middle East policy.

*U.S. support for the “moderate opposition”* that began covertly in 2012 under Obama was twofold. On the one hand, this was the only possible and compromise step that would allow the United States to both support Assad's opponents, and not get too deeply involved in the Syrian conflict plus not disrupt the negotiations on the “nuclear deal” with Iran. On the other hand, the lack of both the necessary level of expertise on Syria and proper control over supplies and their own Arab allies led to the wholesale Islamization of the opposition movement, and after that – to the rapid rise of the Islamic State\*<sup>1267</sup>. The Syrian Train-and-Equip Program, created on an anti-ISIS\* basis, at first also not only did not bring proper results, but also turned into a complete failure.

The situation was radically changed by two decisions. The first, adopted by President Obama in 2015, changed the nature of the Train-and-Equip Program, redirecting its resources to support the already existing units, the core of which was the combat-ready and motivated Kurdish YPG, later along with some Arab units united in the Syrian Democratic Forces alliance. The second decision, made in 2017 by President Trump, closed the secret operation Timber Sycamore, which led to 2012-2014 to dire consequences. President Biden did not change the already existing policy of supporting the opposition.

It is difficult to overestimate the significance of this direction of the US policy in Syria. While supporting the “moderate opposition” did not result in a regime change in Damascus, it significantly changed the course of the conflict, leading first to the rise of the ISIS\*, which required US military intervention to neutralize it, and then to depriving the Assad government of control over the oil-bearing and fertile lands of the northeastern Syria, which significantly complicated the reconstruction of the destroyed country. In this respect, the actions of the United States are reminiscent of the actions of American diplomacy, which did not have the strength to impose its point of view on the parties, but at the same time by all means prevented the final resolution of the conflict, and also demonstrated a stable continuity between the actions of all three administrations (despite some tactical deviations from chosen course by Trump, who repeatedly tried to withdraw from Syria and stop supporting the SDF).

*Military intervention in the Syrian conflict* on the side of the opposition, despite the fact that it was repeatedly and seriously considered by many members of the Obama administration in 2011-2013, did not take place for many reasons. First, the Libyan-style invasion was difficult to implement due to the

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<sup>1267</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

significantly greater power of the Syrian army (especially its air defense forces), as well as the lack of a clear fragmentation of the country, similar to the division into the pro-government West and the rebellious East, which was observed in Libya in the spring of 2011. Secondly, the U.S. Congress and the American public were not eager to start another military adventure in the Middle East, which threatened to turn into an uncontrollable process and chain the foreign policy resources of the United States, which they needed to implement the so-called “pivot to Asia”. Thirdly, direct intervention and the overthrow of the government of Bashar al-Assad as a result of it would be extremely negatively perceived both in Tehran, leading to a possible disruption of negotiations on concluding a “nuclear deal” so important for President Obama, and in Moscow and Beijing, who firmly opposed another Western-sponsored “regime change” as a long-term threat to their own security.

The emergence of an objective security threat from ISIS\*<sup>1268</sup> among other things opened up new opportunities for the United States. Operation Inherent Resolve gave the United States the opportunity to actually push the jihadists out of Iraq into Syria, so that they could concentrate all their military might on fighting Syrian government forces and their allies. At the same time, as mentioned above, the US established links with viable and motivated Kurdish forces in northeast Syria, which were supposed to be a democratic federal alternative to the Assad regime (which they themselves openly declared) and subsequently, probably, become the starting point for the reconquest of the territory of Syria after the victory of the ISIS\* over the Government of Syria.

However, Russia's entry into the conflict on the side of Damascus, followed by the gradual recapture of most of the country's territory by government troops, violated the original plans of the American leadership. An additional obstacle to this plan was the overactive stance of the new administration and President Trump personally, who sought to win a military victory over ISIS\* as soon as possible in order to boost his extremely low ratings. In this regard, especially after achieving this goal in 2017-2019, the fight against the Islamic State\* has become for the United States only a convenient pretext for maintaining its military presence in Syria and, once again, delaying the final end of the civil war. This was especially clearly demonstrated by the active recruitment of former ISIS\* militants into the ranks of pro-American armed groups in the northeast and south of Syria. Air strikes on government troops and institutions in April 2017 and April 2018 were not backed up by any real strategy to further engage in the conflict and were at best designed to once again raise the ratings of President Trump, and at worst provoked in order to prevent an early withdrawal of American troops from Syria.

*The U.S. sanctions policy towards Syria* has a long history dating back to 1979, when the country was included in the list of State Sponsors of Terrorism. In the period up to 2011, many sanctions had already been imposed against the country, but Damascus has successfully learned to circumvent them. However,

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<sup>1268</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

with the outbreak of the civil war, the sanction pressure on the Syrian Arab Republic from the United States increased significantly, imposing significant restrictions on Syrian exports and imports. The sources of this pressure were both the president, who ad hoc introduced new restrictions through his executive order, and Congress, which legislated new sanctions regimes, making it much more difficult to lift them. The pinnacle of American unilateral restrictions was the Caesar Act adopted in 2019, which effectively prohibited the participation of other states in the post-war reconstruction of the Syrian economy and infrastructure. All these measures were designed to at least influence the policy of the government of Bashar al-Assad and force him to change course, and at the most to cause discontent in the territories under his control, which should have led to the expansion of the uprising. Additional weight was given to U.S. sanctions by their synchronization with the restrictions imposed by the European allies.

One should also point out a certain flexibility inherent in the anti-Syrian sanctions policy of the United States. Earlier sanctions could be lifted both against certain individuals, as in the case of fugitive Syrian Prime Minister Riyad Hijab in August 2012, and against entire areas outside government control, which happened in the case of areas under the control of SDF or pro-Turkish militias in May 2022.

At the same time, it is worth noting that the Trump administration's sanctions policy differed from that of the Obama and Biden presidencies. Trump was not a supporter of imposing tough measures against Syria and Russia due to the fact that he hoped to agree with them on coordination in the fight against ISIS\*<sup>1269</sup>, while Congress was completely different. In practice, this confrontation resulted in the struggle for the passage of the CAATSA in 2017 and the Caesar Act in 2019, when the president, realizing that Congress would be able to override his veto in any case, was forced to follow its lead.

Based on the foregoing, one can see the evolution of the US policy in Syria from 2011 to 2022. Washington's strategic approach throughout the conflict was unified and consisted of the need to overthrow the government of Bashar al-Assad. But from a tactical point of view US policy has continuously evolved. At the first stage (2011-2013), the American leadership chose the path that combined secrecy and direct involvement in the conflict as much as possible, since the path of a direct military invasion of Syria, so desired by many Washington politicians, was closed for them. As a result, the United States publicly provided only diplomatic and economic support to the rebels, and at the same time secretly supplying them with various deadly weapons.

At the second stage (2014-2016), which largely followed from the first, as well as from Washington's previous Middle East policy, the United States had a real chance to finally overthrow the regime in Damascus, moreover, by proxy of a kind, in cooperation with which no one would have suspected or blamed them – by the hands of the Islamic State\*. The US counter-ISIS\* strategy called “Iraq-first” was

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<sup>1269</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

designed to push the jihadists out of Iraq and into Syria, where they were supposed to concentrate all their efforts. This approach almost brought the United States success, but its final implementation was prevented by the military operation of the Russian Aerospace Forces, which began in September 2015 and helped the Assad government not only resist, but even recapture most of the territory of Syria from ISIS\*<sup>1270</sup>.

In the third phase, which began in 2016-2018, the American approach to the Syrian conflict evolved into what can be metaphorically called “The Dog in the Manger” tactics. Realizing that Damascus and its allies had actually won a military victory in the civil war, the United States began to do everything possible to prevent this victory from being converted into a pre-war status quo by strengthening the anti-Syrian sanctions regime, artificially maintaining the fragmentation of the country, and keeping its military presence in areas not controlled by the government, as well as maintaining diplomatic pressure on Syria and its allies. At the same time, it is worth noting that this approach, especially in recent years, does not bring any viable results: Damascus’s ties with Moscow and Tehran are only strengthening; negotiations between Damascus and the SDF representatives are slowly but surely moving forward; and the gradual restoration of ties with the Arab world and Türkiye eventually led to the return of Syria to the Arab League and gives hope for the restoration of economic ties lost as a result of the civil war.

Summing up the results of the study, we can conclude that the US policy towards the Syrian conflict throughout its entire length was a policy of compromise. All three administrations, which had to deal with the intricate Syrian tangle of contradictions, were forced to constantly maneuver between extremely polar positions on various issues related to the conflict, both at the international (systemic) and domestic political levels. The result of this was the constant adoption of half-hearted decisions, which, on the one hand, could not lead to a resolution of the conflict on American terms, and on the other hand, should not allow this to be done on the terms of Syria and its allies. This resulted in the flourishing of Islamic extremism, hundreds of thousands of victims, an artificial extension of the conflict and a stalemate in the Syrian peace process, from which there is no way out to date.

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<sup>1270</sup> With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

## List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

- AQI – Al-Qaeda\* in Iraq
- HNC – High Negotiations Committee
- CENTCOM – United States Central Command
- FSA – Free Syrian Army
- HTS – Hayat Tahrir al-Sham\*
- IRI – Islamic Republic of Iran
- ISIL – Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant\*
- ISIS – Islamic State of Iraq and Syria\*
- JCPOA – Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
- JCS – Joint Chiefs of Staff
- NSC – National Security Council
- PKK – Kurdistan’s Workers Party (Kurdish *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*)
- R2P – Responsibility To Protect
- SAA – Syrian Arab Army
- SAR – Syrian Arab Republic
- SDF – Syrian Democratic Forces
- SNC – Syrian National Council
- SOC – Syrian Opposition Coalition (National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces)
- SMC – Supreme Military Council
- YPG – People’s Protection Units (Kurdish *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*)
- UNSC – United Nations Security Council
- UNSCR – United Nations Security Council Resolution
- UNSMIS – United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria

With \* the terrorist organizations banned on the territory of the Russian Federation are marked.

With \*\* the organizations performing as the foreign agents are marked.

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