

Explaining the puzzle: why did the US not intervene in Syria?

Assessing the relative weight of domestic factors and international incentives



"We cannot raise our children in a world where we will not follow through on the things we say, the accords we sign, the values that define us." Just as I will take this case to Congress I will also deliver this message to the world. While the UN investigation has some time to report on its findings, we will insist that an atrocity committed with chemical weapons is not simply investigated, it must be confronted."

-President Obama, The Rose Garden, 31 August 2013

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Introduction

On 21 August 2013, one of the biggest concerns of the international community finally materialized: the execution of a large-scale sarin attack in war-torn Syria. Rebel-held Damascus suburbs were victim of the attacks and with a death-toll soon estimated between 500 and 1,300, this would constitute the most lethal chemical weapons attack since the 1980s.¹ Media reports from the attacks were abhorrent, showing dead civilians, as well as people still fighting for their lives.² The attacks drew widespread international condemnation. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called the attacks a 'war crime' and stated: "I trust all can join me in condemning this despicable crime. The international community has a responsibility to hold the perpetrators accountable."³ US President Obama strongly condemned the sarin attacks, calling them "an assault on human dignity" (White House 2013). At an emergency meeting in Cairo, foreign ministers of the Arab League held the Assad regime responsible for the "heinous" chemical attack and they held that the perpetrators should be tried before an international courts "like other war criminals".⁴ With the sarin attacks, the Syrian civil war, which had already dragged on for 2,5 years, seemed to have reached a tipping point: the international community could no longer stand on the sidelines and watch these cruelties happen.

Civil War in Syria and Connections with the 'Libyan Case'

The unrest in Syria started in March 2011 as part of the wider Arab Uprising. Syrian protesters took the streets in a few major cities to demand the release of political prisoners.⁵ The Assad-regime cracked down on the protests and the situation soon escalated with increasing violence on both sides. By the end of 2011, Syria had transgressed in a full-scale civil war.⁶ In 2012, after a failed Arab League 'peace effort', UN pressure on the Syrian regime increased with the sending of special envoys, observers and a General Assembly

¹ Dominic Evans and Khaled Yacoub Oweis, "Syria gas 'kills hundreds,' Security Council meets," *Reuters*, 21 August, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/08/21/us-syria-crisis-idUSBRE97K0EL20130821> (accessed June 6, 2014).

² *Idem*

³ BBC, "Syria crisis: UN report confirms sarin 'war crime'," *BBC*, 16 September, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24113553> (accessed June 6, 2014).

⁴ Spencer Ackerman, "US politicians sceptical as Obama administration puts case for Syria strike," *The Guardian*, 2 September, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/01/us-members-congress-syria-briefing> (accessed June 6, 2014).

⁵ BBC, "Syria profile," *BBC*, 19 March, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14703995> (accessed June 6, 2014).

⁶ *Idem*

Resolution condemning the violence in Syria.⁷ ⁸ Violence, however, only continued to escalate on both sides. In August 2012, US President Obama announced that the use of chemical weapons would “change his calculation”, marking a shift towards a more interventionist position by the US (White House 2012).

Throughout 2011 and 2012, the UN Security Council was unable to come to an agreement on Syria, with multiple drafts being vetoed by Russia and China (Gifkins 2012). Western P-5 states pushed for strong condemnation of the Assad-regime and demanded action by the Security Council, but Russia and China blocked these efforts (Gifkins 2012). For Russia and China, Syria could not be separated from ‘the Libyan experience’, in which a Security Council resolution authorizing the enforcement of a no-fly zone eventually led to regime-change (Gifkins 2012, 391). The Libyan case is of great relevance to the Syrian conflict as both were part of the Arab Uprisings starting in 2011. Moreover, the eventual outcome of the Libyan crisis (regime-change after months of NATO airstrikes, whereas the former was not part of the mandate of Security Council Resolution 1573)⁹ put Russia and China on their guard in the Syrian case and it helps explaining the gap that emerged between Western P-5 states and Russia and China in the UN Security Council (Gifkins 2012).

In the meantime, the civil war in Syria dragged on and in the spring of 2013, there were first reports of (relatively minor) chemical attacks taking place.¹⁰ Retrospectively, these only constituted the prelude to the much bigger sarin attacks of August 2013, which shocked the world’s consciousness. As of today, the conflict in Syria has cost the lives of over a 160,000 people, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.¹¹

Brief Introduction to the US Position on Intervention in Syria

The US has been an early advocate of firm action against the Syrian government.¹² As early as August 2011, after months of violent repression against protesters, President Obama called

⁷ *Idem*

⁸ UN Doc. GA/RES/11266 (2012)

⁹ UN Doc. S/RES/1973 (2011)

¹⁰ BBC, “Syria chemical weapons allegations,” *BBC*, 31 October, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-22557347> (accessed June 6, 2014).

¹¹ Eric McClam, “Death Toll in Syrian Civil War Tops 160,000: Human Rights Group,” *NBC NEWS/AP*, 19 May, 2014, <http://www.nbcnews.com/#/news/world/death-toll-syrian-civil-war-tops-160-000-human-rights-n108831> (accessed June 6, 2014).

¹² BBC, “Syria crisis: Where key countries stand,” *BBC*, 18 February, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-23849587> (accessed June 6, 2014).

for Syrian President Assad to resign.¹³ By then, the US had already applied rounds of sanctions against Syria, mostly aimed at curtailing finances.¹⁴ In the UN Security Council, the US, along with its partners the UK and France, pushed for action against the Syrian regime, including sanctions and an arms-embargo (Gifkins 2012). In early-2012, the US government still indicated a preference for diplomatic and economic pressure, but started investigating military options.¹⁵ In August 2012, President Obama further raised the stakes, by announcing that the use of chemical weapons would “change his calculus (White House 2012). This was understood as a clear signal to the Assad-regime that any attempt to use chemical weapons against its own population would not go unanswered. In 2013, the US built up its support for the Syrian opposition, in response to reports of small chemical weapon attacks in March and April that year (US State Department 2013). It was only after the sarin attacks of August 2013 that the US government announced its intention to intervene in Syria by military means.¹⁶

The August 2013 Sarin Attacks: US Response and Its Reversal

The US responded with strong condemnation to the sarin attacks of 21 August 2013. The US government stated it wanted to hold the Assad-regime (which it deemed responsible for the attack) accountable for its deeds. In the days following the Ghouta-attacks, the Obama-administration built up a case for limited US military action against Syria for its alleged use of chemical weapons.¹⁷ This announcement of an intention to hold the Assad-regime to account by military means did not last long though. On 31 August 2013, President Obama, to the surprise of many, announced his decision to postpone the strikes and ask for congressional approval (White House 2013). By mid-September, US plans to strike Syria seemed to have

¹³ Scott Wilson and Joby Warrick, “Syria’s Assad must go, Obama says,” *The Washington Post*, 19 August, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/assad-must-go-obama-says/2011/08/18/gIQAelheOJ_story.html (accessed June 6, 2014).

¹⁴ *Idem*

¹⁵ Elisabeth Bumiller, “Military Points to Risks of a Syrian Intervention,” *The New York Times*, 11 March, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/12/world/middleeast/us-syria-intervention-would-be-risky-pentagon-officials-say.html?pagewanted=all&_r=2& (accessed June 6, 2014).

¹⁶ Karen DeYoung and Anne Gearan, “After Syria chemical allegations, Obama considering limited military strike,” *The Washington Post*, 26 August, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/kerry-obama-determined-to-hold-syria-accountable-for-using-chemical-weapons/2013/08/26/599450c2-0e70-11e3-8cdd-bcdc09410972_story.html (accessed June 6, 2014).

¹⁷ The Telegraph, “Syria: John Kerry’s statement in full,” *The Telegraph*, 30 August, 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10277442/Syria-John-Kerrys-statement-in-full.html> (accessed June 6, 2014).

definitively reversed, as the US and Russia reached a diplomatic deal that called for the peaceful chemical disarmament of Syria.¹⁸

The Puzzle of This Research

The observation of top-level announcements of a military strike and, within a timespan of weeks, a complete cancellation of those plans, forms the puzzle of this research. It is puzzling, because the White House would probably fear that such a rapid change in policies would undermine its credibility. It is also puzzling, because the US *did* follow through on the announcements of military action in the case of Libya. Although this is not a comparative case study, some references will be made to the Libyan case in this research, in order to give context and meaning to decision-making on Syria.

The dependent variable under analysis is the shifting US willingness to intervene in Syria in the time period extending from 21 August 2013 (when the sarin attacks in the Damascus suburbs took place) until 14 September 2013 (with the announcement of a US-Russian deal on Syria). This temporal analysis provides significant variation on the dependent variable: whereas the Obama-administration clearly communicated its willingness to intervene in Syria in the days after the sarin attacks, the Administration eventually did not follow through on these threats (White House 2013).¹⁹ Apparently, somewhere along the road, the Administration's willingness to intervene in the Syrian conflict faltered. The aim of this research is then to identify the factors that contributed to Washington's sudden loss of appetite in an intervention and in what way these factors contributed. These factors will in turn address the research question of this study: how can US decision-making on intervention in Syria in the aftermath of the 2013 sarin attacks be best explained?

Structure of the Research

This research proceeds in the following way: first, an overview of conventional explanations for US willingness to intervene in Syria will be given, along with their limitations. This section focuses on those explanations that are often mentioned in the public debate on Syria and it serves as a preliminary analysis. Second, the theoretical section will introduce alternative explanations for US willingness to intervene in Syria and explain their logic. These

¹⁸ BBC, "US and Russia agree Syria chemical weapons deal," *BBC*, 14 September, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24091633> (accessed June 6, 2014).

¹⁹ BBC, "Syria crisis: Barack Obama puts military strike on hold," *BBC*, 11 September, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-24043751> (accessed June 6, 2014).

explanations are mostly US domestically-oriented, but also include an explanation focused on international incentives. Hypotheses and variables will be introduced in this part of the research. Third, the use of methods and sources and the case selection will be discussed and justified. The method of process-tracing will guide this research, as it is particularly helpful in identifying potential answers to the research question. After the discussion of the research design, the analysis section will test the hypotheses introduced in the theoretical framework. The conclusion of this research will assess the relative explanatory power of the different explanations for US willingness to intervene in Syria. It will be argued that the risks and unintended consequences of a military operation and strong opposition by the Pentagon were the main factors in dissuading the Obama-administration from the 'strikes' against Syria. The final part of the conclusion will discuss the significance of these findings and their relevance for both academia and policy-making.

The Limitations of Conventional Explanations for US Willingness to Intervene in Syria

Syria in Crisis: Different Levels of Analysis

In general, there are two levels of analysis to crises like the one in Syria: a domestic and an international level. The prevailing explanations for (non-)intervention in Syria in the academic and public debate have generally focused on factors pertaining to the Syrian conflict itself (Syria's domestic dimension) or on international factors (the international dimension). The former includes factors like Syria's military capabilities (that could pose a challenge to intervention), shifting balances of power on the ground and changes in the opposition (radicalization, fragmentation, infighting etc.). The latter constitutes an even broader category, including but not limited to UN Security Council dealings with the crisis (Gifkins 2012; Mohamed 2013), the involvement of outside state actors (ranging from the US to Turkey and Russia to Iran), regional organizations (e.g. the Arab League), outside non-state actors (such as extremist groups like Al-Nusra, finding their origins elsewhere in the region) and private individuals (e.g. Western 'jihadists' who often travel by themselves to these conflict areas). The issues of R2P (the Responsibility to Protect) (Morris 2013), and human rights in Syria have also been related to discussions of intervention in the academic debate (Marauhn 2013).

Given the prevalence of these ‘Syria-domestic’ and international explanations for (non-)intervention in Syria in the public and the academic debate, this literature review will focus on a few prominent ones.

Prevailing Explanations for US Willingness to Intervene in Syria and Their Weaknesses Syria’s military capabilities

Hypothesis: the greater Syria’s military capabilities, the less likely the US government will be willing to intervene in Syria

One of the interpretations of Washington’s reluctance to intervene in Syria is that the US was genuinely concerned about Assad’s military capabilities. Some analysts in the field have warned against the risks of comparing the Syrian case to the earlier intervention in Libya.²⁰ They argued that Assad’s military capabilities by far exceeded those that the Gaddafi-regime possessed during the Libyan civil war.²¹ Since the outbreak of the civil war, the Assad-regime has considerably upgraded its air- and sea-attack capabilities.²² It allegedly spent billions on state-of-the-art Russian weapon systems, including antiaircraft missiles, combat aircraft and tanks. These advanced weapon systems would constitute a considerable challenge for the enforcement of a no-fly zone as was done in Libya under Security Council Resolution 1973.²³ In July 2013, US General Dempsey conceded that “Assad’s regime could withstand limited air strikes.”²⁴

This explanation, however, only explains why the US would have a general reluctance towards intervention in Syria. It is not particularly helpful though, in explaining why the US first announced to intervene in Syria in late-August 2013, but in the end chose not to do so. Therein lies the weakness of this explanation. If the US was really concerned about the capabilities of the Syrian military, President Obama would probably not have not made his “red lines” statement in August 2012, warning the Assad-regime against using chemical weapons against its own population (White House 2012). After all, why would you make such a threat, if you are not sure you can follow through on it, because of the strength of the opponent’s military? The same logic counts for the announcements of strikes in late-August

²⁰ Vivienne Walt, “ Why Syria Won't Get the Libya Treatment from the West,” *Time*, 18 March, 2012, <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2109372,00.html> (accessed June 6, 2014).

²¹ *Idem*

²² *Idem*

²³ UN Doc. S/RES/1973 (2011)

²⁴ Spencer Ackerman, “US military intervention in Syria would create 'unintended consequences',” *The Guardian*, 22 July, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/22/us-military-intervention-syria> (accessed June 6, 2014).

2013. So, although the capabilities of the Syrian military will have probably played some role in Washington's calculus, it is unlikely to have been a decisive factor in deciding whether to intervene or not in the conflict in the aftermath of the sarin attacks.

Radicalization of the armed Syrian opposition

Hypothesis: The greater the radicalization of the Syrian opposition, the less likely the US government will be willing to intervene in Syria

A second risk warranting against intervention is that it might create a power vacuum. Whereas many in the West despise the Assad-regime, the question is whether the alternative would be preferable. Since 2012, the armed Syrian opposition has clearly radicalized, with *inter alia* Salafist militant groups having joined the ranks of the opposition.²⁵ The attitude of the moderate opposition towards the more extremist factions has been ambivalent: at the one hand, most moderates reject the extremist ideologies of these groups, but at the other hand, they welcome the inflow of hardened fighters and a more reliable stream of resources in terms of money and arms.²⁶ The divisions within the Syrian opposition are only widening: in September 2013, some of the extremist groups explicitly rejected the authority of the Syrian opposition-in-exile.²⁷ This bears the question what will happen to Syria in a post-Assad era. The odds that extremist factions will be the ones filling up the power vacuum after Assad 'leaves' are great enough to warrant against intervention.²⁸

Whereas the radicalization of the Syrian opposition has appeared to be a real concern to Washington,²⁹ this again does not adequately explain the change in intervention policies in August/September 2013. There was clear evidence of radical factions joining the Syrian opposition as early as 2012,³⁰ the year that President Obama issued his 'red-lines' statement. If the US government would have been genuinely concerned about the risks of a post-Assad 'fundamentalist' Syria, it would have thought twice before drawing a red line in August 2012.

²⁵ Michael R. Gordon and Anne Barnard, "U.S. Places Militant Syrian Rebel Group on List of Terrorist Organizations," *The New York Times*, 10 December, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/11/world/middleeast/us-designates-syrian-al-nusra-front-as-terrorist-group.html> (accessed June 6, 2014).

²⁶ *Idem*

²⁷ Rania Abouzeid, "Syrian Opposition Groups Stop Pretending," *The New Yorker*, 26 September, 2013, <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2013/09/fsa-assad-syrian-opposition-groups-leaders-in-exile.html> (accessed June 6, 2014).

²⁸ Ewen MacAskill, "Obama: post-Assad Syria of Islamist extremism is nightmare scenario," *The Guardian*, 22 March, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/mar/22/obama-syria-assad-syria-extremists> (accessed June 6, 2014).

²⁹ *Idem*

³⁰ C.J. Chivers, "Rebels Say West's Inaction Is Radicalizing Syria," *The New York Times*, 5 October, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/05/world/middleeast/rebels-say-wests-inaction-is-radicalizing-syria.html?_r=0 (accessed June 6, 2014).

One may assume that President Obama had the potential unintended consequences of an intervention in mind when he drew his line. In the same vein, if the radicalization of the Syrian opposition was truly an overwhelming concern to Washington, the White House would probably not have announced its intentions to launch strikes against Syria in response to the August 2013 sarin attacks.

Internationalization of the Syrian civil war

Hypothesis: The greater the internationalization of the Syrian civil war, the less likely the US government will be willing to intervene in Syria

The rapid internationalization of Syria's civil war has also made intervention an unattractive option. As of now, a wide array of actors is involved in the Syrian conflict, ranging from state actors (US, Russia, Turkey, Iran, the Gulf States etc.) to organized non-state actors (extremist groups like Al-Nusra) and from international organizations (the UN, but also regional organizations like the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council) to private individuals.³¹ The UN has been involved since the very start of the civil war. It has been rather ineffective, though, in mediating the conflict.³² Multiple special envoys were sent without any concrete results.³³ ³⁴ Most importantly, the UN Security Council was paralyzed on the Syrian question for more than two years, until the US and Russia managed to broker a deal on the disarmament of Syria's chemical arsenals.³⁵ Regional organizations like the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council have also been engaged, all with their own agendas. A more recent development is the influx of organized non-state actors from the region. Amongst these groups of guerilla fighters -often with war experience elsewhere in the region- are extremist groups, like Al Nusra, which was designated a terrorist organization by the US government in late 2012.³⁶ The proliferation of actors involved in the Syrian conflict

³¹ BBC, "Syria profile," *BBC*, 19 March, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14703995> (accessed June 6, 2014).

³² BBC, "Syria talks: Mediator apologises for lack of progress," *BBC*, 15 February, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26207315> (accessed June 6, 2014).

³³ Joe Sterling, "Kofi Annan resigns as envoy to Syria," *CNN*, 2 August, 2012, <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/08/02/world/meast/syria-annan-resign/> (accessed June 6, 2014).

³⁴ Staff and agencies, "Syria peace talks break up as UN envoy fails to end deadlock," *The Guardian*, 15 February, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/15/syria-peace-talks-break-up-geneva> (accessed June 6, 2014).

³⁵ John Irish and Michelle Nichols, "U.S., Russia agree on Syria U.N. chemical arms measure," *Reuters*, 26 September, 2013. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/09/26/us-un-assembly-syria-resolution-idUSBRE98P1AJ20130926> (accessed June 6, 2014).

³⁶ Michael R. Gordon and Anne Barnard, "U.S. Places Militant Syrian Rebel Group on List of Terrorist Organizations," *The New York Times*, 10 December, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/11/world/middleeast/us-designates-syrian-al-nusra-front-as-terrorist-group.html> (accessed June 6, 2014).

makes it increasingly complicated to intervene: if one decides to intervene, on whose behalf would that be? If one intervenes on behalf of the opposition (as far as one can still speak of one opposition), one indirectly supports the agendas of Turkey, Al-Nusra and the Gulf States as well. On the contrary, if one abstains from intervention, this can be viewed as implicit support for the Assad-regime, backed by states like Russia and Iran.

The weakness of this explanation, however, is that the Syrian civil war was already greatly internationalized by mid-2012. By then, the UN had already sent a special envoy (Kofi Annan) and observatory missions to the conflict, the Arab League had been involved with a mission of its own and state actors ranging from the US to Iran and from Russia to Turkey all exerted at least indirect influence on the conflict.³⁷ It was against this context of a highly internationalized civil war that President Obama drew his red line in August 2012 (White House 2012). And it was against the context of an even more internationalized civil war, that the Obama-administration announced its plan for ‘limited military strikes’ against Syria in late 2013 (White House 2013). So, whereas the high degree of internationalization obviously made it ‘trickier’ to intervene in Syria, this explanation does fail to account for the change in intervention policies in August/September 2013.

Alternative Explanations for US Willingness to Intervene in Syria

Zooming in on US Domestic Factors and Increasing the Variance of the Independent Variables

The weaknesses of the explanations discussed in the literature review demonstrate the need for alternative explanations. First of all, it is important to look at factors that played a role beyond the international context of the Syrian civil war. When analyzing US decision-making on Syria, it is vital to zoom in on domestic political factors in the US, such as the role of Congress, bureaucratic politics and the influence of public opinion. After all, these factors have an impact on the ability of the US government to pursue foreign policy objectives on the international arena. The domestic factors under analysis are linked to three hypotheses, which are put to the test in the analysis section of this research. Although this research has a focus on US domestic factors, international factors, obviously at play in the Syrian conflict, will not be overlooked. In order to justice to them, a final hypothesis will consider these international incentives. This way, this research will have two sets of competing hypotheses: one set with

³⁷ BBC, “Syria profile,” *BBC*, 19 March, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14703995> (accessed June 6, 2014).

domestic explanations (three hypotheses) and one set with international explanations (one hypothesis).

A second limitation of the explanations reviewed in the literature review was that they ‘operated’ too much as parameters: all of these factors did not significantly change in the period of 21 August – mid-September 2013. That was the main reason they could not account for the change in US intervention policies in the time period under analysis. The explanations and variables proposed in this section *do* show variance, which make them more suitable for addressing the research question of this study: ‘how can US decision-making on intervention in Syria in the aftermath of the 2013 sarin attacks be best explained?’

Domestic Explanations for US Willingness to Intervene in Syria

Explanation 1: Institutional Checks on the US Government’s Ability to Authorize the Use of Force

Logic

The institutional framework of a state has a great effect on the ability of the executive to freely and autonomously pursue foreign policy goals. Logically, in states with highly constrained executives, the executive will find more obstacles to translate desired foreign policy outcomes in real outcomes than in states in which executives can operate relatively freely in foreign affairs. In this study, ‘the executive’ refers to those governmental bodies charged with foreign affairs and the use of force, as these are the topics under consideration. For the US, this includes the President, the State Department, and the Department of Defense. This explanation focuses on the relevant constitutional and congressional checks on the US executive’s ability to execute foreign policy goals and authorize the use of force.

The US Constitution grants Congress the power to declare war (U.S. Const. art. I, § 8. cl. 11), while it grants the President, in its role as Commander-in-Chief, the power to direct the military after a congressional declaration of war (U.S. Const. art. 2, § 2). These provisions thus require cooperation between the President and Congress, with Congress funding or declaring operations and the President directing them (Legal Information Institute 2014). In practice, however, Presidents have often engaged in military operations without express congressional consent (Legal Information Institute 2014). In response, Congress passed the War Powers Resolution in 1973, which requires that the President communicate to Congress the committal of troops within 48 hours and limits troop deployment to 60 days, after which Congress has to vote on extension (Legal Information Institute 2014). The War Powers Resolution, however, has rarely been invoked in practice (Howell and Pevehouse 2007).

Moreover, it is important to note that “overt actions” (such as the number of times the War Powers Resolution has been invoked) say very little about the strength of congressional checks on presidential war powers (Howell and Pevehouse 2007, 17). As Howell and Pevehouse (2007, 23) observe: “At the front of a military venture, members of Congress usually do not enact laws that either endorse or oppose the president’s plans. Instead, members more often effect change indirectly, participating in larger debates about the efficacy of military action, raising concerns about the costs involved, and expressing doubts about the plans laid before the American public.” Since this research looks at a period “at the front of a military venture”, the focus will thus be on the concerns and doubts raised by lawmakers as opposed to more formal congressional action such as lawmaking.

Variables and indicators

I=indicators

- **IV:** the strength of constitutional and congressional checks on the US government with respect to the authorization of the use of force
 - *I: what are the constitutional requirements for using force?*
 - *I: what are the congressional checks on the use of force?*
 - *I: was there discernible congressional opposition to a US intervention in Syria?*

Hypothesis

H1: the stronger the constitutional and the congressional checks on the President with respect to the use of force, the less likely the US government will be willing to intervene in Syria

Causal mechanism

Constitutional requirements and congressional checks put constraints on the US government when it comes to foreign policy making in general and the use of force in specific. The constitutional limits on the use of force and acts like the War Powers Resolution restrict the government’s authority in war times (Legal Information Institute 2014). Besides formal-institutional checks, Congress can increase the political costs of the presidential use of force by raising doubts and concerns and voicing objections (Howell and Pevehouse 2007, 23). Even though the US government is offered some discretion when it comes to the use of force, it depends on Congress for funding and political support (Howell and Pevehouse 2007). Every Administration knows that the costs of fighting a war without support in Congress will come

at a price: a price that will be paid in the next elections. In practice this means that the US government *has* to respond to congressional concerns, either in anticipation or in reaction to them.

*Observable implications*³⁸

For the outcome:

- If one observes strong constitutional and congressional checks on the presidential use of force, then one should see a US government less willing to intervene in Syria.

For the process:

- A change in presidential policies regarding the use of force would be preceded by:
 - Intense congressional debates on the use of force
 - Congressmen raising concerns, doubts and objections to the Administration's plans to use force in public and in the media
 - Congressmen emphasizing constitutional constraints to the presidential use of force
 - Congressmen threatening to use constitutional/legal measures to constrain the presidential use of force

Explanation 2: The Influence of Bureaucratic Politics on Foreign Policy Making and the Use of Force

Logic

The “bureaucratic politics-approach” to foreign policy rejects the notion of the state as a ‘black box’. Instead, it analyses how the structure of the policy-making process influences the resulting decisions. The ‘bureaucratic politics’ model allows for a divergence of interests within the state: essentially, it rejects the notion of concepts like ‘the national interest’, as there is just a set of actors pursuing different perceived interests. So, whereas ‘Explanation 1’ still treated the branches of the state as unitary actors (the executive vs. Congress, the executive vs. the constitutional order etc.), this theory zooms in further. It therefore allows for conflicts of interest within state branches, such as the US executive. Decisions eventually arise from arenas of contest in which the balance of advantage is constantly shifting (Heywood 2011, 132).

³⁸ *N.B. for all lists of observable implications in this theoretical section counts: these lists are not exhaustive, nor do all listed observable implications have to be present to find evidence for the hypothesis to which they belong (George and Bennett 2005, 174-176)*

- **IV:** bureaucratic infighting

The focus here will be on bureaucratic infighting in the executive, in this case the Obama-administration. A good way to conceptualize this is to assess whether the Obama-administration acts in unity. An administration acting ‘in unity’ would mean that actors within the administration share and communicate similar visions, goals and interests. In an administration plagued with bureaucratic infighting, on the contrary, actors communicate different and sometimes even conflicting visions, goals and interests.

- *I: do government agencies express conflicting visions, goals and/or interests to the media/public?*
- *I: are there discernible clashes within the Obama-administration? For instance, reported on by the media or in public discourse?*

Hypothesis

H2: The greater the degree of ‘bureaucratic infighting’ within the Obama-administration, the less likely the US government will be willing to intervene in Syria

Causal mechanism

The bureaucratic politics model could explain fluctuations in the willingness to intervene over time, rightly because it allows for the presence of different and even conflicting interests within the Obama-administration. According to the model, actors within the Obama-administration (departments, officials etc.) are likely to have different ideas about the wisdom of an intervention in Syria. The decision that is eventually taken on intervention is then the result of the ability of these actors to convince their colleagues of their interpretation of the situation in Syria and their policy preferences. The President’s perception of the ‘attractiveness’ of the option of intervention also depends on bureaucratic processes: if he is exposed to conflicting information about the merits of intervention and if he is opposed by officials and agencies within his own Administration on the matter, he may be inclined to look for alternative policy options.

Observable implications

For the outcome:

- If one observes instances of bureaucratic infighting and divisions within the Obama-administration, then one should see a US government less willing to intervene in Syria.

For the process:

- A change in presidential policies regarding the use of force would be preceded by:
 - Government agencies expressing different/conflicting visions, goals and/or interests
 - Instances of disagreement, discord and quarrels within the Obama-administration

Explanation 3: The Influence of Public Opinion on Foreign Policy Making and the Use of Force

Logic

In democratic states, public opinion can be assumed to play a considerable role in policy making. Public opinion is the means by which voters inform decision-makers which policies receive approval and which not. This then puts pressures on decision-makers (constantly having elections in the back of their mind) to choose the policies that receive the highest public approval (Tomz 2009). In this way, public opinion constraints the ability of the executive to arrive at desired foreign policy outcomes (assuming that these are not always in line with the public's preferences).

The acknowledgement that governments have to take their domestic audience into account when acting on the international arena has been very influential in the literature. It was Putnam (1988) who proposed a model that includes the reciprocal influence between domestic and international affairs. Unlike state-centric theories (such as Realism), the two-level approach recognizes that the concept of "national interest" cannot be taken for granted, and domestic conflict over it often arises (Putnam 1988, 460). The two-level approach recognizes that central decision-makers strive to reconcile domestic and international imperatives simultaneously (Putnam 1988). Relating Putnam's work to the case at hand, it shows that the US is not managing the Syrian crisis as a unitary actor, but as a "contested arena" in which different domestic actors try to win over the foreign policy result they desire.

The notion that international relations and domestic politics are intricately linked is also central to the 'audience costs thesis'. This thesis builds further on Putnam's model of two-level-games and holds that leaders are vulnerable to domestic backlash when operating on the international arena (Tomz 2009, 827). This specifically applies to making threats: when

statesmen make threats on the international arena, but then do not follow through, this almost inevitably leads to domestic backlash (Tomz 2009, 827). Tomz (2009, 829) defines his central concept, audience costs, as “committing and not following through”. The evidence of his research indicates that empty commitments cause disapproval of leaders to surge (Tomz 2009, 830). The audience costs thesis is very applicable to this research, as US President Obama issued a threat against the Assad-regime in August 2012, stating that there are red lines that cannot be crossed without sanctions (White House 2012). Some authors and news media have discarded this statement as an empty threat, as the Obama-administration eventually cancelled a planned military strike on Syria after the August 2013 chemical attacks.

Variables and indicators

I=indicators

- **IV:** US public opinion on the issue of intervention in Syria. Both the salience of the issue (does the American public care about this foreign policy topic?) and the nature of public opinion on the topic (positive/neutral/negative) will be assessed.

Dimension I: salience of the issue of (a potential) intervention

- *I: results of public opinion polls on salience questions*

Dimension II: nature of the public opinion (negative/neutral/positive)

- *I: public attitudes towards intervention expressed in public opinion polls*

Hypotheses

H3a (conditional hypothesis): the higher the salience of the issue of intervention to the public, the more likely the President will take public opinion into account when making a decision on intervention

H3b (main hypothesis): given high salience (H3a fulfilled), the nature of public opinion will have an impact on the nature of the eventual foreign policy decision. The stronger the public is turned against an intervention, the less likely the US government will be willing to intervene in Syria

Causal mechanism

Assuming that public opinion plays a considerable role in policy-making in democratic states, the salience of policy issues matter. If the public does not care about a particular policy issue, public opinion is unlikely to affect policy-making. If, on the contrary, the public feels very strong about a policy issue, this is likely to have an effect on policy-making. Second, the

nature of public opinion matters. If public opinion on a policy issue is negative (for instance, reluctant towards intervention in Syria) this will likely constrain policy-making (the political costs of the option of intervention have increased). The combination of issue salience and nature of the public opinion then interacts: when an issue is highly salient and the public mood is strong into one direction (either positive or negative), public opinion is quite likely to inform policy choices in democratic states. More related to the case at hand: public disapproval of an intervention in Syria (if established) could have played a role in the White House's decision to retreat from its earlier announcements to intervene in Syria.

Observable implications

For the outcome:

- If one observes a strong and highly negative public mood on intervention, then one should see a US government less willing to intervene in Syria.

For the process:

- A change in presidential policies regarding the use of force would be preceded by:
 - A strong public mood on the proposed intervention (high salience of the issue of intervention)
 - Public opinion polls showing that many Americans (pluralities or majorities) do not support the proposed plan of action regarding the use of force
 - Congressmen emphasizing concerns of their constituents and public opinion in general
 - Administration officials indicating that they assign weight to public opinion in their decision to use force

International Explanations for US Willingness to Intervene in Syria

Explanation 4: The Influence of International Incentives on Foreign Policy Making and the Use of Force

Logic

This hypothesis looks at the international incentives for US intervention in Syria. What factors on the international arena (the need to uphold international law, US credibility in the world, the risk of being engaged in too many conflicts at the same time etc.) and factors 'on the ground' (feasibility of a military operation, the effects of a military operations on the

balance of power in Syria etc.) have likely played a role in US decision-making on intervention in Syria?

Given the complexity of the case at hand, the analysis of this hypothesis does not pretend to give a definitive account of all international and ‘on-the-ground’ factors that may have influenced Washington’s decision-making on intervention in the Syrian conflict. Instead, it is an attempt to identify the *main* factors and processes that may have eventually dissuaded the US from an intervention in Syria. These factors are divided into two main categories in the section below: normative (legal and moral) and strategic (political and military) and incentives for intervention. The variables within these categories will be analyzed in the analysis section. They are part of the more general hypothesis that, at the end of the day, not domestic political factors, but international incentives carried the day in US decision-making on intervention in Syria. This last hypothesis thus serves as a test case for the domestic explanations for US willingness to intervene in Syria that are central in this research. If there is overwhelming support for the hypothesis that international incentives dissuaded the US from intervening in Syria, this weakens the proposition underlying this research, namely that US domestic factors played a significant and generally overlooked role in US decision-making on intervention in Syria

Variables and indicators

I=indicators

- **IV:** international incentives

Normative

- Legal incentives
 - Upholding of international law and norms
 - *I: intensity with which international law and norms are mentioned in government officials’ speeches*
- Moral incentives
 - Upholding of state’s own values on the international arena
 - *O: intensity with which own values are mentioned in government officials’ speeches*

Strategic

- Political incentives
 - Political/military credibility of the US in the world

- *I: occasions on which US political/military credibility is mentioned in government documents/expert analyses*
 - War-weary American public
 - *I: occasions on which American war-weariness is mentioned in speeches and statements by White House officials*
 - Risk of ‘imperial overstretch’ (a situation in which a state extends itself beyond its ability to maintain or expand its military and economic commitments (Kennedy 1989))
 - *I: occasions on which the risk of imperial overstretch (or something similar to that) is mentioned in government documents/expert analyses*
 - World sentiment on potential US strikes on Syria
 - *I: results of relevant public opinion polls in third countries*
 - *I: statements by foreign leaders and governments*
 - Availability of credible alternatives to strikes against Syria
 - *I: the availability of credible alternatives to the US government’s plan to conduct a ‘limited military strike’ against Syria. In order for an alternative to be credible, the US must consider it as good or better than the current option (strikes)*
- Material incentives
 - Feasibility and effectiveness of a ‘limited military strike’
 - *I: comments on the feasibility and effectiveness of a ‘limited military strike’ by US officials and outside experts*
 - Risks and potential ‘unintended consequences’ of a ‘limited military strike’
 - *comments on the risks and potential ‘unintended consequences’ of a ‘limited military strike’ by US officials and outside experts*
 -

Hypothesis

H4: the stronger the international incentives warranting against intervention in the Syrian conflict, the less likely the US government will be willing to intervene in Syria

Causal mechanism

The incentives summed up above can be treated as independent variables that either increase the odds of an intervention or decrease the odds of an intervention. For instance, the stronger the US feels about upholding international norms (such as the prohibition of the use of chemical weapons), the more likely it is that it will intervene in the Syrian conflict. How, then, could these factors explain the willingness by the Obama-administration to use force in Syria *overtime*? The Administration's willingness to intervene in the aftermath of the sarin attacks and its (un)willingness to do so a few weeks later may be explained by the relative weight assigned to various international incentives over time. Moral, political and material considerations have most certainly all played a role in the President's equation and the analysis will have to show which of these considerations eventually emerged as most influential in the Administration's decision-making on intervention in Syria.

Observable implications

For the outcome:

- If one observes important international incentives warranting against US intervention in Syria, then one should see a US government less willing to intervene in Syria.

For the process:

- A change in presidential policies regarding the use of force would be preceded by:
 - A decrease in the weight assigned to international incentives supporting the use of force
 - An increase in the weight assigned to international incentives warranting against the use of force

Research Design

Method

For this research, the method of process-tracing seems to be especially suited, because "it attempts to identify the intervening causal process- the causal chain and causal mechanisms- between an independent variable (or variables) and the outcome of the dependent variable" (George and Bennett 2005, 206). This is exactly what this research attempts to do: it is an attempt to identify the "causes of effect", in which 'the effect' (a 'varying' US willingness to intervene in Syria in the period 21 August- mid-September eventually culminating in non-intervention) is already known. In the literature review, some 'causes' (or explanations) for

this outcome were identified, but because of their limitations, alternative explanations were proposed in the theoretical section of this paper. It is the aim of this research to identify through which causal pathways these variables operated and ultimately had an effect on the outcome (if they did at all). Process-tracing will then help in assessing the unique contribution of the different independent variables in producing the observed outcome of US non-intervention in Syria.

To illustrate this with an example: it could be that, at first sight, it seems that congressional opposition and public opinion both played an important role in dissuading President Obama from intervening in Syria. However, this says little about *how* congressional opposition and public opinion helped producing the outcome of a cancellation of the strikes. The causal pathway of these factors then helps in assessing which of these two factors may have mattered most. For instance, if congressional opposition against an intervention in Syria appears to be purely based on constituents' attitudes towards intervention, we may as well say that public opinion was the 'root cause' in producing the outcome here. For if public opinion was not turned against an intervention, Congress would not have been either. Such a causal analysis would show that public opinion (in this simplified example) was the leading factor in producing the outcome of non-intervention in Syria. If, however, it turns out that Congressmen were concerned about more than their constituents alone (for instance, about the effectiveness of the strikes, the risk that strikes could escalate the situation in Syria etc.) in their assessment of intervention in Syria, congressional opposition could carry potential causal weight *next* to the factor of public opinion.

Case Selection

Explanatory Advantages of the Case Selection

The case selection of the US has the major advantage that it allows me to look into the decision-making of one of the global players with the biggest leverage on the Syrian conflict. As a Permanent Member of the UN Security Council, the US holds a veto on every decision taken in this body (UN 2014). Since the UN Security Council is the main forum in which global decisions are taken on Syria, this veto power is very significant. Besides, the US has major 'informal' power sources: given its sizeable economic and military power, it can press and credibly threaten actors, such as the Syrian regime. More concretely, the US announced a military strike against the Assad-regime, after the alleged use of chemical weapons by this regime in August 2013 (White House 2013). The US thereby seemed to back an earlier statement made by President Obama in 2012, warning the Assad-regime that "the use of

chemical weapons would be totally unacceptable” (White House 2012). The fact that the US eventually did not follow through on this threat forms a very interesting research puzzle: how can one draw a red line and then, when it seems to have been crossed, not enforce it, while still maintaining credibility? The clear tension between these objectives makes US decision-making on Syria an excellent case of inquiry for this research.

Explanatory Disadvantages of the Case Selection

The inherent disadvantage of a single case study is that it is hard to generalize. After having read this research, one might have gained understanding as to why the US acted as it did in response to the use of chemical weapons in Syria in August 2013. However, given the uniqueness of this case, how much will these findings tell about the more general phenomena it relates to, such as decision-making on intervention and foreign policy making? George and Bennett (2005) argue that case studies *can* contribute to theory development about broader phenomena. It is possible to generalize from unique cases “by treating them as members of a class or type of phenomenon; that is, as instances of alliance formation, deterrence, war initiation” etc. (George and Bennett 2005, 112-113). The case study of this research, focusing on US decision-making on intervention in Syria, could then be treated as an instance of ‘the impact of domestic politics on foreign policy making and the use of force’ or ‘decision-making on intervention’. This approach would allow for making contingent generalizations (George and Bennett 2005, 112).

Data Collection

Evidence for this research is derived from academic articles, news articles, government documents and press releases, poll data, voting behavior in US Congress and the UN Security Council and think tank analyses. The advantage of looking at the US is that all sources are in English, which makes this project more feasible.

Testing the Alternative Explanations for US Willingness to Intervene in Syria

This analysis section will test the hypotheses introduced in the theoretical section one by one. At the end of every explanation, a provisional statement on the weight of the factor under consideration is provided.

Institutional Checks on the US Government's Ability to Authorize the Use of Force

To establish that congressional and constitutional influences made the Obama-administration change course on Syria, one needs to look at the record of what happened between mid-August 2013 and mid-September 2013. Did Congress voice concerns over the announced intervention in Syria? And if so, on what grounds? If it were just on some minor grounds, President Obama could have been assumed to take these blocks from the road, as any President needs to when gathering support for an upcoming intervention (Howell and Pevehouse 2007). In order to bring structure to the analysis, three periods are discerned: first, the period in the direct aftermath of the sarin attacks, in which the Administration assigned responsibility to the Assad-regime and built up its case of an intervention to punish the regime. Second, the period after August 31 (the day on which the Administration announced it would seek congressional approval), in which the Administration attempted to convince Congress about its plans. Third, a period, starting on September 9, in which the plan of an intervention gradually disappeared from the table, making room for a plan in which the international community called on the Assad-regime to give up on its chemical arsenals.

Period 1: The Administration Building Up Its Case

21 Aug. – 30 Aug.

After having heard of the sarin attacks in Damascus of 21 August 2013, Washington had to respond. In August 2012, President Obama had made publicly clear that “the use of chemical weapons would be totally unacceptable”, and there were “red lines”, thereby implying that any use of chemical weapons by the Assad-regime would not go unanswered (White House 2012). First of all, it was up to the Administration to establish whom had committed the sarin attacks committed. In the days after the attacks, the Obama-administration quickly built up what seemed to be a solid case: US intelligence had showed the Assad-regime and its forces preparing to use chemical weapons and then launching the rockets in the highly populated, opposition-controlled suburbs of Damascus (White House 2013). It also detected “after-attack euphoria” among Syrian officials, which supported the Administration’s conviction that the Syrian regime was behind the attacks (White House 2013). What added to suspicion was that the regime did not immediately allow a UN-inspectors team to the area. Instead, it shelled the area, which was still under opposition control after the sarin attacks of 21 August.³⁹ It was only on 26 August, after four days of intensive shelling and clashes between government and

³⁹ The Telegraph, “Syria: John Kerry's statement in full,” *The Telegraph*, 30 August, 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10277442/Syria-John-Kerrys-statement-in-full.html> (accessed June 8, 2014).

opposition forces that UN inspectors could start their work.⁴⁰ The US government saw this again as a piece of evidence that the Syrian regime had something to hide. The Administration was also reluctant to wait for evidence from the UN inspections. As Secretary of State John Kerry put it: “The UN investigation will not affirm who used these chemical weapons (...), they will only affirm whether such weapons were used. By the definition of their own mandate, the UN can’t tell us anything that we don’t already know.”⁴¹ In the days following the sarin attacks, the Obama-administration thus firmly attributed responsibility for the sarin attacks to the Assad-regime and it seemed to be in a hurry to respond.

The next step in the process for the Administration was to come up with an appropriate response to the sarin attacks. US government officials soon announced plans to conduct a “limited military strike” on Syria, an effort initially supported by the UK and France.⁴² The aim of the plan was to punish the Assad-regime and to deter the future use of chemical weapons.⁴³ As the Administration was gathering international support, it did not overlook to build support at home. Congress was still on recess in the first few days after the sarin attacks, but some Congressmen already voiced concerns about the plans for a military intervention in Syria. President Obama first acknowledged this on 31 August 2013, when he stated in his address to the nation on Syria: “Over the last several days, we’ve heard from members of Congress who want their voices to be heard. I absolutely agree. So this morning, I spoke with all four congressional leaders, and they’ve agreed to schedule a debate and then a vote as soon as Congress comes back into session (White House 2013). This marked a significant change in the Administration’s rhetoric, as its message before that day was more unidirectional: it assertively tried to convince the world and the American public that the US had to act, and there was no time for second-guessing. Apparently, the Administration had changed its mind around 31 August, but for what reason?”

Technically, the Administration did not have to go to Congress with the request for congressional approval: the War Powers Resolution grants the Administration the opportunity to authorize military force for 60 days without congressional approval (Legal Information Institute 2014). A possible motivation for the Administration’s unexpected move is that it anticipated more widespread congressional opposition once Congress would be back from

⁴⁰ *Idem*

⁴¹ *Idem*

⁴² Nicholas Watt et al., “Syria crisis: UK and US finalise plans for military strikes,” *The Guardian*, 28 August, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/aug/27/uk-us-strikes-syrian-regime> (accessed June 9, 2014).

⁴³ *Idem*

recess. Given the fact that both sides of the political spectrum already started voicing concerns about the Administration's plans in the days preceding August 31, this is not implausible.⁴⁴ The lawmakers that spoke up about the intervention, primarily voiced concerns on two grounds: first, they expressed their concern that the Administration would go along with its plans without consulting Congress and second, some of them had doubts on the merits of the Administration's plans for strikes against Syria. Most of this criticism came in after UK Prime-Minister Cameron failed to convince the House of Commons to support an intervention in Syria.⁴⁵ With this important coalition partner disappearing from the scene, US domestic opposition increased.⁴⁶ ⁴⁷ The fact that Congressmen indicated they wanted to be consulted on the Syrian issue partly explains why the Administration decided to seek congressional approval. Another explanation is that the Administration needed a solid basis of support somewhere: with falling international support, it decided to build support at home, so that the political fortunes of a potential intervention could be shared with Congress.⁴⁸

Period 2: The Administration Seeking Congressional Approval 31 Aug. – 9 Sept.

The paradox is that, after the Administration announced it would consult Congress on the Syrian issue, congressional opposition only increased.⁴⁹ While many Congressmen applauded the Administration's decision to seek congressional authorization for its plans, much skepticism was voiced over the merits of an intervention.⁵⁰ Many lawmakers questioned the wisdom of a military intervention in Syria. The grounds on which they objected were diverse: some mentioned the concerns of their constituents, others held that more international support was needed for an intervention, whereas a third group expressed doubts about the

⁴⁴ Lauren Fox, "Democrats Divided on How to Proceed in Syria," *US News*, 29 August 2013, <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2013/08/29/democrats-divided-on-how-to-proceed-in-syria> (accessed June 9, 2014).

⁴⁵ BBC, "Syria crisis: Commentators react to Cameron defeat," *BBC*, 30 August, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-23894749> (accessed June 9, 2014).

⁴⁶ *Idem*

⁴⁷ Fox News, "British lawmakers reject military action in Syria, in setback for Obama administration," *Fox News*, 29 August, 2013, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2013/08/30/syria-strike-push-hits-hurdles/> (accessed June 9, 2014). and

⁴⁸ Peter Baker and Jonathan Weisman, "Obama Seeks Approval by Congress for Strike in Syria," *The New York Times*, 31 August, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/01/world/middleeast/syria.html?_r=0 (accessed June 9, 2014).

⁴⁹ Janet Hook, "Obama Faces Bipartisan Opposition on Syria in Congress," *The Wall Street Journal*, 1 September, 2013, <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887323324904579047520324200710> (accessed June 9, 2014).

⁵⁰ Paul Singer, "Opposition to Syria attack emerges in Congress," *USA Today*, 2 September, 2013, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2013/09/01/congress-syria-rand-paul-kerry/2752965/> (accessed June 9, 2014).

effectiveness of strikes.⁵¹ ⁵² The Administration was severely scrutinized in a House hearing on the issue on September 4.⁵³ Some Republican lawmakers called the Syrian issue another foreign policy ‘fumble’ of the Obama-administration, after the Benghazi-attacks, NSA-scandals and previous indecisiveness in the Syrian case (Republican Rep. Joe Wilson questioned why there was no call for a military response after alleged chemical attacks in April 2013).⁵⁴ Moreover, opposition at the hearing was not only heard from Republican side: Democratic Rep. Alan Grayson vowed to encourage his colleagues to vote against the resolution to strike Syria. This was not the most encouraging sign for his co-partisans in the Administration, Secretary of State Kerry and Secretary of Defense Hagel, who were struggling to defend the Administration’s case.⁵⁵

The Administration was not completely without support: of the ‘Big Four’, only Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell was reluctant in supporting the Administration’s call for military strikes against Syria (Republican House Speaker John Boehner, Democratic House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi and Democratic Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid had already expressed their support for the President).⁵⁶ The support of Republican senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham was also important for the Administration: as two leading lawmakers on national security issues of the opposition party, they had the potential capacity to swing fellow-Republicans. Still, the Administration faced a tough challenge: Democrats occupied a majority in the Senate (54-46), but 60 votes would be needed to clear “anticipated procedural roadblocks”.⁵⁷ Things went downhill for the Administration on Monday 9 September, when six senators, including five Republicans and one Democrat, announced they would vote against a resolution authorizing the use of force (see Figure 1 for Congressmen’s voting intentions at the time, showing that the Administration would likely have lost a vote on

⁵¹ *Idem*

⁵² John Harwood and Jonathan Weisman, “House Republicans Say Voters Oppose Intervention,” *The New York Times*, 6 September, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/07/us/politics/house-republicans-say-constituents-are-strongly-opposed-to-a-syria-strike.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 (accessed June 12, 2014).

⁵³ Lauren Fox, “Kerry and Hagel Get Earful From House About Syria,” *US News*, 4 September, 2013, <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2013/09/04/kerry-and-hagel-get-earful-from-house-about-syria> (accessed June 9, 2014).

⁵⁴ *Idem*

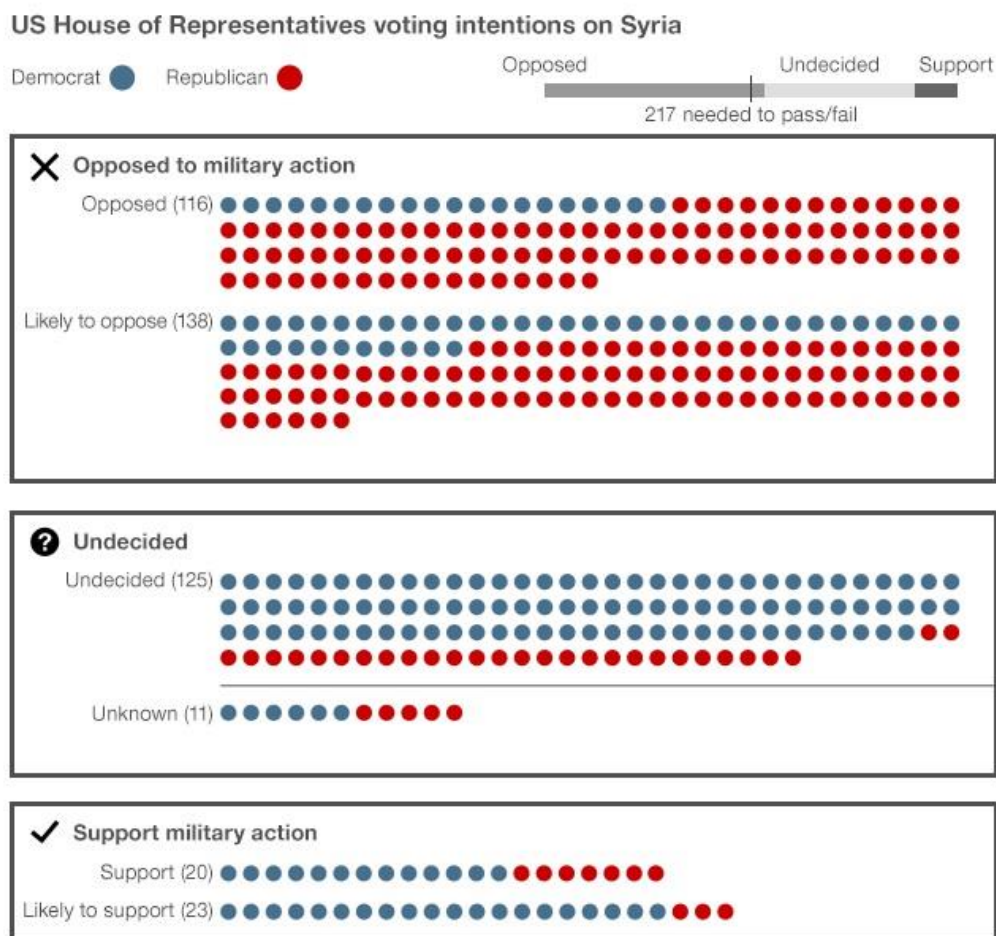
⁵⁵ *Idem*

⁵⁶ Thomas Ferraro, “Big question on Syria vote: What will Senate Republican leader do?” *Reuters*, 7 September 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/09/07/us-syria-crisis-mcconnell-idUSBRE9860DQ20130907> (accessed June 9, 2014).

⁵⁷ *Idem*

the use-of-force resolution).⁵⁸ This was a clear signal that the Administration's efforts to build bipartisan effort had been ineffective and it prompted Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, to delay a procedural vote on the issue.⁵⁹ At the same time, news began to spread that there could be a way out for the Administration, as Russia proposed a plan of chemical disarmament to Syria.⁶⁰

Figure 1: voting intentions Congress on intervention in Syria on 11 September 2013



Source: ABC, BBC, 11 September 2013

⁵⁸ Susan Davis, "Senate delays Syria vote as Obama loses momentum," *USA Today*, 10 September, 2013, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2013/09/09/obama-congress-syria-vote-in-doubt/2788597/> (accessed June 9, 2014).

⁵⁹ *Idem*

⁶⁰ Dan Roberts, "Syria crisis: Obama welcomes Russia's chemical weapons proposal," *The Guardian*, 10 September 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/09/us-russian-proposal-syria-chemical-weapons> (accessed June 8, 2014).

chemical disarmament of Syria by a certain date.⁶³ If the Assad-regime would not fully comply, the President could still launch limited military action.⁶⁴

By this time, it can be reasonably argued that the Administration's original plan of a "limited military strike" was slowly moving from the table. The support for the use-of-force resolution had been eroding since the start of September, most visibly during the House hearing and the public announcement of a group of lawmakers that they would vote against. The Administration, publicly welcoming the Russian proposal (although with some caveats), also signaled that it was no longer fully committed to go ahead with the strikes.⁶⁵ Last, the Administration was aware of the drafting efforts of the bipartisan group and did not counteract these, for instance, by doubling advocacy for its own plan.⁶⁶ These are all indications that the Administration over the course of September 2013 eventually succumbed to congressional pressure and opposition against the planned military strikes against Syria.

The Influence of Bureaucratic Politics on Foreign Policy Making and the Use of Force

The Obama-administration's Syria policy has for a long time been subject to heated debate. As the previous section demonstrated, government officials and lawmakers have often been at odds with how to proceed in the Syrian case. However, it would be naïve to assume that there was a clear consensus *within* the Administration on the matter of Syria. The most apparent clash of visions and interests within the Administration seem to have been between the White House and the State Department on the one hand and the Defense Department on the other hand. On multiple occasions, Pentagon officials have warned against or reacted with caution to proposals coming from the White House and the State Department.

As early as March 2012, Pentagon officials warned that a US military intervention in Syria would be a "daunting and protracted operation", "with the potential for killing vast numbers of civilians."⁶⁷ The Pentagon issued its warning when making preliminary military

⁶³ Janet Hook, "Senators Drafting New Syria Resolution," *The Wall Street Journal*, 10 September, 2013, <http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2013/09/10/senators-drafting-new-syria-resolution/> (accessed June 9, 2014).

⁶⁴ *Idem*

⁶⁵ Dan Roberts, "Syria crisis: Obama welcomes Russia's chemical weapons proposal," *The Guardian*, 10 September 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/09/us-russian-proposal-syria-chemical-weapons> (accessed June 8, 2014).

⁶⁶ Janet Hook, "Senators Drafting New Syria Resolution," *The Wall Street Journal*, 10 September, 2013, <http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2013/09/10/senators-drafting-new-syria-resolution/> (accessed June 9, 2014).

⁶⁷ Elisabeth Bumiller, "Military Points to Risks of a Syrian Intervention," *The New York Times*, 11 March, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/12/world/middleeast/us-syria-intervention-would-be-risky-pentagon-officials-say.html?pagewanted=all&r=2&> (accessed June 9, 2014).

contingency plans, in response to a request by President Obama. At the time, the Administration still believed in diplomatic and economic means to pressure the Assad-regime.⁶⁸ So, in early 2012, the Administration and the Pentagon still shared a similar vision on Syria: all options should be on the table, but given the perils of a military intervention, diplomatic and economic means were to be preferred.

Frictions in the Obama-administration on the Syrian issue started to arise in 2013. A strong signal of disagreement within the Administration became visible during April 2013 congressional hearings on Syria. In separate appearances, Secretary of State John Kerry and Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel provided two sharply different perspectives on the Syrian opposition.⁶⁹ Mr. Kerry was optimistic, emphasizing the opportunities in working with the opposition. In his account, the US had been working “very, very closely” with the Syrian opposition (short of providing lethal aid), which had strengthened the Syrian resistance.⁷⁰ Besides, Mr. Kerry expressed his confidence in the moderate elements in the opposition and the opposition’s “headway on the ground.”⁷¹ Mr. Hagel and General Dempsey, on the contrary, appeared to be much more pessimistic about the Syrian opposition and the military situation in Syria in general. General Dempsey retreated from an earlier position in which he supported arming trusted elements of the Syrian opposition, because he was no longer sure the US “could clearly identify the right people” within the opposition.⁷² Directly contradicting Mr. Kerry’s earlier statement that the opposition was making headway, General Dempsey warned about “a risk that this conflict has become stalemated.”⁷³ When asked by lawmakers about the Pentagon’s role in assessing “additional military responses”, Mr. Hagel and General Dempsey surprised by responding that the White House had never asked the Pentagon for any recommendations, only for options.⁷⁴ The April 2013 congressional hearing thus showed an Administration that fundamentally disagreed on a most basic assessment of the situation in Syria. Retrospectively, it can be identified as one of the first instances in which the State Department and the Department of Defense publicly clashed.

A second instance came in July 2013, when General Dempsey explicitly warned against the expected “unintended consequences” of any US military action in Syria in a

⁶⁸ *Idem*

⁶⁹ Michael Gordon, “Top Obama Officials Differ on Syrian Rebels in Testimony to Congress,” *The New York Times*, 17 April, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/18/world/middleeast/key-obama-officials-differ-on-syria-in-testimony.html> (accessed June 9, 2014).

⁷⁰ *Idem*

⁷¹ *Idem*

⁷² *Idem*

⁷³ *Idem*

⁷⁴ *Idem*

briefing to the US Senate.⁷⁵ General Dempsey's gloomy assessment of the different military options (ranging from arming and training the rebels to mastering complete control of Syria's chemical stocks), which would all be "costly and uncertain" did not line up with Mr. Kerry's earlier statements and with President Obama's announcement in June 2013 that he would intensify the cooperation with the Syrian opposition (with some government officials confirming that this would include lethal aid, such as the delivery of light weaponry and ammunition to the Syrian opposition).⁷⁶ *The Guardian* explained the divisions within the Obama-administration from efforts to balance "a desire to avoid another war in the Middle East with ending one of the world's worst humanitarian disasters."⁷⁷ Based on the above discussion, the former desire was clearly embodied by the Department of Defense and the latter by the White House and the State Department. By July 2013, a rift within the Administration had clearly formed.

The rift seems to have originated from early doubts in the Pentagon about President Obama's red line statement of August 2012. Former Defense Secretary Robert Gates stated in a January 2014 interview it was a "serious mistake" for President Obama to draw a "red line" on chemical weapons use.⁷⁸ A former intelligence official confirmed that many in the US national security establishment had long been troubled by the President's red line (Hersh 2014). According to this official, the Joint Chief of Staff had asked the White House for clarity on the exact meaning of the red line and how it would translate in military orders (Hersh 2014). The Pentagon then studied how the threat could be carried out, but learnt little about the President's reasoning (Hersh 2014).

Right after the August 2013 sarin attacks, when President Obama announced a "limited military strike", disagreement between the White House and the Pentagon seems to have arisen over the scope and the intensity of the mission. The White House allegedly rejected an early Pentagon plan involving targets for bombing, because it was "insufficiently painful" to the Assad-regime (Hersh 2014). According to the former intelligence official, original targets included "only military sites and nothing by way of civilian infrastructure."

⁷⁵ Spencer Ackerman, "US military intervention in Syria would create 'unintended consequences'," *The Guardian*, 22 July, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/22/us-military-intervention-syria> (accessed June 8, 2014).

⁷⁶ Matthew Lee and Julie Pace, "Obama to step up military support of Syrian rebels," *AP*, 13 June, 2013, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/us-officials-say-assad-used-chem-weapons> (accessed June 9, 2014).

⁷⁷ Spencer Ackerman, "US military intervention in Syria would create 'unintended consequences'," *The Guardian*, 22 July, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/22/us-military-intervention-syria> (accessed June 8, 2014).

⁷⁸ Rebecca Ballhaus, "Gates: Syria Red Line Was 'Serious Mistake'," *The Wall Street Journal*, 15 January, 2014, <http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2014/01/15/gates-syria-red-line-was-serious-mistake/> (accessed June 9, 2014).

Under White House pressure the target list was expanded in a way that one could no longer reasonably speak of a “limited, military strike”. The new target list was meant to “completely eradicate any military capabilities Assad had” (Hersh 2014). According to investigative journalist Hersh (2014), General Dempsey had been skeptical about a US strike on Syria ever since it was announced, as he was concerned about an escalation of the conflict to the wider region. He also had serious doubts about the Administration’s argument that it had the evidence that the Assad-regime was behind the sarin attacks. Given the fact that Assad-forces were winning ground, it did not make sense for the regime to use chemical weapons at that point of time (Hersh 2014). When intelligence reached Mr. Dempsey that seriously questioned the regime’s involvement with the attacks, he allegedly convinced the President to call off the strike (Hersh 2014). According to this account, the official White House story of seeking congressional authorization for the strikes was just a way to sell the turnabout to the public (Hersh 2014). Some caution with Hersh’s account is warranted though, since it is mostly based on hear-say evidence from anonymous sources within the Obama-administration. Still, there are more sources showing doubts in the Pentagon about the White House’s plans for strikes.

A *Washington Post* article published on 30 August 2013 showed widespread skepticism about the strikes within the US military.⁷⁹ Having assumed for months that the US was unlikely to intervene militarily in Syria, the Defense Department was caught off guard by the White House’s ‘sudden’ announcements of strikes.⁸⁰ The announcement had made many in the armed services ‘uneasy’, as interviews with officers ranging from captains to a four-star general showed. Retired Lt. Gen. Gregory S. Newbold directly questioned the expertise of the White House on military matters: “There’s a broad naiveté in the political class about America’s obligations in foreign policy issues, and scary simplicity about the effects that employing American military power can achieve.”⁸¹ Others shared this notion, by arguing that there was a lack of clarity about political ends (“if it’s just punishment, there are other means”).⁸² Another concern was that the White House spent insufficient time thinking through “potential unintended consequences” of the operation, including resilience by the

⁷⁹ Ernesto Londono, “U.S. military officers have deep doubts about impact, wisdom of a U.S. strike on Syria,” *The Washington Post*, 29 August, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-military-officers-have-deep-doubts-about-impact-wisdom-of-a-us-strike-on-syria/2013/08/29/825dd5d4-10ee-11e3-b4cb-fd7ce041d814_story.html (accessed June 9, 2014).

⁸⁰ *Idem*

⁸¹ *Idem*

⁸² *Idem*

Assad-regime, new rounds of chemical weapon attacks and a military response by Israel.⁸³ One officer wondered how the Administration could conceive of a new military operation, while the US was still in the midst of retreating from Afghanistan. Last, but certainly not the least, officers complained that the White House only consulted military personnel in a “pro-forma manner”, further contributing to frustrations within the Pentagon. The fact that the Washington Post interviewed military officers from all different ranks contributes to the representativeness of the reporting and it shows that skepticism was not limited to the Pentagon’s leadership.⁸⁴

Based on the above analysis, it seems that the Pentagon has had a consistent preference for non-intervention in Syria. The White House, on the contrary, seems to have shifted preferences: whereas in early 2012, it still preferred diplomatic and economic means to pressure the Assad-regime,⁸⁵ it started more active support for the opposition forces in 2013 (US State Department 2013). The driving factor behind this change in preferences seems to be the President’s ‘red-lines statement’ of August 2012. This statement forced the President to act when news of the March/April 2013 chemical attacks spread. From then on, the Administration announced it would expand non-lethal support for the rebels (US State Department 2013), with other sources confirming that lethal aid was included as well.⁸⁶ The Pentagon, however, was reluctant in going along with this change, as indicated by General Dempsey’s skepticism about any military option in his July 2013 briefing to the US Senate.⁸⁷

The observed difference in preferences on Syria caused some visible conflicts between the White House and the State Department on the one side and the Pentagon on the other side in 2013, and continues to do so in 2014.⁸⁸ The evidence presented also supports the idea that throughout 2013, President Obama was confronted with contradicting assessments on the situation in Syria. If this really led to the cancellation of the strikes in August 2013, as Hersh argued, cannot be definitively concluded based on the available evidence. Neither can it be

⁸³ *Idem*

⁸⁴ *Idem*

⁸⁵ Elisabeth Bumiller, “Military Points to Risks of a Syrian Intervention,” *The New York Times*, 11 March, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/12/world/middleeast/us-syria-intervention-would-be-risky-pentagon-officials-say.html?pagewanted=all&_r=2& (accessed June 9, 2014).

⁸⁶ Matthew Lee and Julie Pace, “Obama to step up military support of Syrian rebels,” *AP*, 13 June, 2013, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/us-officials-say-assad-used-chem-weapons> (accessed June 9, 2014).

⁸⁷ Spencer Ackerman, “US military intervention in Syria would create 'unintended consequences',” *The Guardian*, 22 July, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/22/us-military-intervention-syria> (accessed June 8, 2014).

⁸⁸ Gordon Lubold and Nathaniel Sobel, “FP’s Situation Report: State, Pentagon clash over Syria intervention,” *Foreign Policy*, 8 April, 2014, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/04/08/fps_situation_report_state_pentagon_clash_over_syria_intervention (accessed June 9, 2014).

denied that the Pentagon's consistent concerns with US military involvement in Syria must have played a role in the Administration's decision-making on intervention. Given the Defense Department's expertise on national security issues and the use of force, the White House could not have afforded to simply disregard its concerns and objections to the plans on strikes against Syria. For this reason, this 'bureaucratic-politics' explanation must surely be accounted for when explaining the eventual cancellation of US strikes against Syria in September 2013.

The Influence of Public Opinion on Foreign Policy Making and the Use of Force

In order to assess the influence of public opinion on US decision-making on Syria in the aftermath of the August 2013 sarin attacks, two factors have to be looked at: first, whether the American public cared about the events in Syria and the plans of the Administration to intervene in the conflict (issue salience) and second, whether the public opinion was strong in one direction (either supporting or opposing an intervention). Assessing the salience of the Syrian question is of prior importance, for if the public did not care about the issue at all, it would not likely have played a big role in the Administration's decision-making.

This analysis assesses the salience of the Syrian conflict and American public opinion on the issue over time, in the period ranging from December 2012 to September 2013. The advantage of such a temporal analysis is that it can potentially show the influence of evolving external events on public opinion: it could be, for instance, that the American public did not care much about the Syrian conflict in 2012, but that this changed after the August 2013 sarin attacks. Or, it may be that the American public was turned against an intervention until August 2013, but changed its mind after seeing the horror of the sarin attacks. These, of course, are all hypothetical examples, but they do show that a temporal analysis is capable of showing changes in public mood over time.

A December 2012 Pew Research Center survey showed that only 38% of the American people followed the political violence in Syria closely.⁸⁹ The respondents also demonstrated little appetite for US intervention in the conflict: more than 60% of the respondents answered that the United States did not have a responsibility "to do something in Syria."⁹⁰ About the same percentage (65%) opposed arming anti-government rebels in Syria. According to the Pew Research Center, these attitudes had remained relatively unchanged

⁸⁹ Bruce Stokes, "Americans on Middle East turmoil: Keep us out of it," *Pew Research/CNN*, 14 December, 2012, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2012/12/14/americans-on-middle-east-turmoil-keep-us-out-of-it/> (accessed June 9, 2014).

⁹⁰ *Idem*

since the Spring of 2012.⁹¹ 2012 was thus a year in which the salience of the Syrian conflict to the American public was limited (with a majority of people not closely following the news on the conflict) and in which the public was clearly turned against any further US involvement in the conflict.

The Pew Research Center conducted another survey round in late April 2013, when evidence of the (limited) use of chemical weapons in Syria flowed in and political pressure on the Obama-administration to act increased.⁹² First of all, the April 2013 survey showed that just 18% of the public said to have followed the news about the Syrian chemical weapons issue very closely.⁹³ This marks a 20% drop in public interest in the Syrian issue since the December 2012 survey. Support for a military intervention in Syria *had* increased, with now 45% of the American public favoring an intervention if it were confirmed that the Syrian government had used chemical weapons against anti-government groups.⁹⁴ Although this group did not constitute a majority, it did form a plurality, as smaller groups said they opposed military action (31%) or did not have an opinion on intervention (23%).⁹⁵ The alleged use of chemical weapons thus seemed to have an effect on American public opinion, as an earlier survey in March 2013 still showed a clear majority (64%) turned against even arming the Syrian rebels.⁹⁶ Still, not too much should be made of the April 2013 survey results. With only 18% of the American public following the news on Syria closely, the public most likely did not exert too much pressure on the Obama-administration in taking a decision either way.

This public disengagement with the Syrian conflict seemed to have dramatically changed in the aftermath of the August 2013 sarin attacks. In a mid-September 2013 Pew Research Center survey, 45% of the respondents indicated it had followed the news on Syria (“Possible U.S. airstrikes in Syria and diplomatic efforts to have Syria give up control of its chemical weapons.”) ‘very closely’ and 31% stated it had followed the news ‘fairly closely’ (PollingReport.com 2013). Compared to April 2013, there thus was a rise of 27% in people closely following the news on Syria very closely. As of September 2013, an impressive total of 76% of the American public thus displayed at least some interest in the ongoing

⁹¹ *Idem*

⁹² Bruce Stokes, “Middle Eastern and Western publics wary on Syrian intervention,” *Pew Research*, 2 May, 2013, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/05/02/middle-eastern-and-western-publics-wary-on-syrian-intervention/> (accessed June 9, 2014).

⁹³ *Idem*

⁹⁴ *Idem*

⁹⁵ *Idem*

⁹⁶ *Idem*

developments regarding Syria (PollingReport.com 2013). A Gallup Poll conducted in the same month (11-12 September) also showed considerable public interest in news about the civil war in Syria, with a total of 70% Americans either following the news ‘very closely’ (31%) or ‘somewhat closely’ (39%) (PollingReport.com 2013). It can thus be reasonably assumed that the Syrian issue was salient to the American public in the aftermath of the sarin attacks. However, did these attacks affect a similar change in the American appetite for intervention? This cannot be said to be the case.

Polls conducted by multiple organizations showed clear majorities of Americans opposed to a military intervention in Syria. ABC News/Washington Post Polls showed consistent majorities against US missile strikes on Syria, even under the assumption that the Assad-regime was indeed responsible for the sarin attacks (PollingReport.com 2013). Their late August poll showed 36% supportive of an intervention and 59% opposing, with support dropping further in September polls, to only 30% (PollingReport.com 2013). Gallup Poll polls also showed drops in support for U.S. military action against Syria: in its 3-4 September 2013 poll, 36 % favored and 51% opposed an intervention; in its 11-12 September poll, only 28% still favored an intervention, with 62% being opposed (PollingReport.com 2013). The highest number of support for a military intervention was found in a late-August NBC News/Wall Street Journal Poll, with 50% supportive and 44% opposing (6% was unsure) (PollingReport.com 2013). Two caveats with this poll are in place, however: the question was phrased very narrowly (with US military action only directed against those military units and infrastructure directly used in carrying out the chemical attacks) and support for such a limited intervention dropped in a second round to 44%, with now 51% opposed (PollingReport.com 2013).

To put it shortly, the salience of the Syrian conflict significantly increased after the August 2013 sarin attacks, but public opposition against US military intervention in Syria remained largely unchanged. And if it changed, public opposition against an intervention actually *increased* compared to earlier figures (the April 2013 Pew Research Center poll).⁹⁷ Relating this to the hypothesis, H3a can be said to be fulfilled: in August/September 2013, the Syrian issue was a salient foreign policy topic, increasing the likelihood that the President took public opinion into account when making a decision on intervention. H3b is also

⁹⁷ Bruce Stokes, “Middle Eastern and Western publics wary on Syrian intervention,” *Pew Research*, 2 May, 2013, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/05/02/middle-eastern-and-western-publics-wary-on-syrian-intervention/> (accessed June 9, 2014).

fulfilled: given high salience and strong public sentiment against intervention, the likelihood of the President intervening in an outside conflict (Syria) can be assumed to have decreased.

It is tempting to conclude, based on the evidence presented, that the Obama-administration was dissuaded from an intervention in Syria at least partly due to public opposition against the strikes. Although this sounds very plausible, the mere presence of public opposition against the strikes and eventual US non-intervention in Syria alone does not constitute a correlation between the two. For that to be established, it is important to look at the President's statements and speeches of the time: did he mention public opinion relating to Syria, and if he did, in what way?

President Obama was in a precarious position in the period of August/September 2013. On the one hand, in order to avoid a domestic backlash resulting from making empty commitments on the international arena, the President must have felt an incentive to enforce his 'red line' and go ahead with the strikes (Tomz 2009, 830). On the other hand, with majorities opposed against an intervention, going ahead with the strikes would not have boosted the President's approval ratings either. In a Q&A-session during the G20 summit in Russia in early-September 2013, the President acknowledged the weight of public opinion, but hinted it was not the leading factor in his decision on an intervention. In a response to a reporter's question, President Obama conceded that at the end of the day, he may not persuade a majority of the American people that a strike against Syria would be "the right thing to do."⁹⁸ At the same time, he believed that Congressmen and he himself as President should not only listen to their constituents, but also needed to make decisions about what they "believed was right for America." The President admitted that "a whole bunch of decisions" he made were unpopular, but he did so, because he thought they were the right thing to do and he trusted his constituents to allow him to come up with his best judgment, for that they elected (and re-elected) him.⁹⁹ The last point the President made in his statement was that "these kinds of interventions are always unpopular, because they seem distant and removed."¹⁰⁰

Based on his statement during the G-20 summit, it would be far-fetched to stick to the premise that public opinion was a major factor in dissuading the President from an intervention in Syria. The President's statement clearly indicated his awareness of the public mood on intervention, but instead of 'following the polls', he mentioned his responsibility to

⁹⁸ Amanda Terkel, "Obama: Decision To Strike Syria Shouldn't Depend On Public Opinion," *The Huffington Post*, 6 September, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/06/obama-syria-public-support_n_3880481.html (accessed June 9, 2014).

⁹⁹ *Idem*

¹⁰⁰ *Idem*

ultimately do what “is right for America”.¹⁰¹ So, in the end, the available evidence does not fully support the hypothesis under consideration: although Americans displayed considerable interest in a potential intervention in Syria and were in majorities opposed to these plans, this factor does not really seem to have influenced the Administration’s willingness to intervene in Syria.

The Influence of International Incentives on Foreign Policy Making and the Use of Force

This analysis will assess the role of normative, political and military incentives for intervention one by one. This is not to say that these incentives can always be completely separated from each other, but it helps in structuring the analysis. The final part of the analysis will assess the relative weight of the different international incentives under consideration.

Normative Incentives Impacting on the US’ Willingness to Intervene in Syria

The US government has had a consistent concern with the potential use of chemical weapons in the Syrian conflict. In his well-known August 2012 ‘red-lines’ statement, President Obama first emphasized the significance of these weapons in his decision-making on Syria:

“The issue of chemical weapons doesn’t just concern Syria; it concerns our close allies in the region, including Israel. It concerns us. We cannot have a situation where chemical or biological weapons are falling into the hands of the wrong people. We have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus. That would change my equation.”

- Remarks by the President to the White House Press Corps, 20 August 2012

The President’s statement was first put to the test in March and April 2013, when a few minor uses by chemical weapons were reported on by the UN.¹⁰² The attacks, however, did not attract much media attention and the Obama-administration sufficed with repeating its earlier stated red line and it assigned responsibility (with a high degree of confidence) to the Assad-

¹⁰¹ *Idem*

¹⁰² BBC, “Syria chemical weapons allegations,” BBC, 31 October, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-22557347> (accessed June 8, 2014).

regime (US Department of Defense 2013). As a response, it later decided to increase ‘non-lethal support’ to the opposition (US State Department 2013).

The critical test of the President’s ‘red line’, however, only really came about on 21 August 2013, when a large scale sarin attack claimed the lives of hundreds of Syrians.¹⁰³ Washington responded soon by publicly condemning the chemical attacks, firmly assigning responsibility to the Assad-regime and, eventually, announcing plans for a “limited military strike” against Syria, to punish the Assad-regime for the use of chemical weapons.¹⁰⁴ Speeches and statements by US government officials in the time show the strong normative component underlying the Administration’s plan to intervene in Syria. A good example of this is the speech that President Obama gave on 31 August 2013, the first time that he addressed the nation on the chemical attacks and a US response.

First of all, the President described the horror of the attacks by calling them “an assault on human dignity” and a “heinous act” (White House 2013). Second, the President emphasized the implications of the sarin attacks for international law and norms: “It (the attack) risks making a mockery of the global prohibition on the use of chemical weapons. It could lead to escalating use of chemical weapons, or their proliferation to terrorist groups who would do our people harm” (White House 2013). Third, the President stressed the clash of the attacks with American values: “We cannot raise our children in a world where we will not follow through on the things we say, the accords we sign, the values that define us,” and “our security and our values demand that we cannot turn away from the massacre of countless civilians with chemical weapons” (White House 2013). These remarks by President Obama show that the Obama-administration was predominantly motivated by normative concerns (both legal and moral) in its condemnation and response to the use of chemical weapons in Syria. It then, in turn, explains how the White House arrived at its plans of a ‘limited, military strike’ against Syria: given its strong normative concern about the use of chemical weapons, first communicated to the world in August 2012, the White House felt obliged to come up with a robust response, or as President Obama phrased it: “In a world with many dangers, this menace must be confronted” (White House 2013).

¹⁰³ Dominic Evans and Khaled Yacoub Oweis, “Syria gas 'kills hundreds,' Security Council meets,” *Reuters*, 21 August, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/08/21/us-syria-crisis-idUSBRE97K0EL20130821> (accessed June 6, 2014).

¹⁰⁴ The Telegraph, “Syria: John Kerry's statement in full,” *The Telegraph*, 30 August, 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10277442/Syria-John-Kerrys-statement-in-full.html> (accessed June 8, 2014).

Political Incentives Impacting on the US' Willingness to Intervene in Syria

Political incentives also played a major role in US decision-making in the aftermath of the Ghouta-attacks. In the first place, the political credibility of President Obama at home and the credibility of the US in the world was at stake. Ever since President Obama drew his red line in August 2012, the world had focused its attention on Washington: any sign that the President's red line was crossed in Syria would need a firm and unequivocal response by the US if it was to maintain its credibility. At home, critics of the Obama-administration could easily exploit supposed unanswered crossings of the President's red line as signs of 'presidential weakness'.¹⁰⁵ The media further raised the stakes by intensive reporting on the President's 'red line' in the aftermath of the sarin attacks in August 2013. *The Washington Post* commented on the many twists that the Administration gave to President Obama's red line,¹⁰⁶ and former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld commented in a news show: "What makes the US look weaker: drawing a line and not enforcing it or drawing a line and then only delivering a pin prick?"¹⁰⁷ Given the fact that his political credibility was on the line,¹⁰⁸ President Obama must have felt an inclination to follow through on his earlier made threats and go ahead with the strikes against Syria. This first political incentive thus made the President *more* likely to intervene in Syria.

A second political consideration will have had an opposite effect on US decision making. After being elected as the President who would bring an end to US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the President must have felt reluctant in engaging in yet another 'military adventure'.¹⁰⁹ In fact, President Obama mentioned this in his 'Syria-speech' on 31 August 2013: "I know well that we are weary of war. We've ended one war in Iraq. We're ending another in Afghanistan. And the American people have the good sense to know we cannot resolve the underlying conflict in Syria with our military" (White House 2013).

¹⁰⁵ Ewan MacAskill, "Syria's chemical weapons red line has troubling consequences – for Obama," *The Guardian*, 26 April, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/apr/26/syria-chemical-weapons-red-line-obama> (accessed June 8, 2014).

¹⁰⁶ Glenn Kessler, "President Obama and the 'red line' on Syria's chemical weapons," *The Washington Post*, 6 September, 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/wp/2013/09/06/president-obama-and-the-red-line-on-syrias-chemical-weapons/> (accessed June 8, 2014).

¹⁰⁷ FoxNews, "Rumsfeld on Syria, Obama's 'red line' and the world stage," *FoxNews*, 29 August, 2013, <http://video.foxnews.com/v/2637175341001/rumsfeld-on-syria-obamas-red-line-and-the-world-stage/?intcmp=related#sp=show-clips> (accessed June 8, 2014).

¹⁰⁸ Steve Holland and Matt Spetalnick, "Obama: U.S. credibility on the line in Syria response," *Reuters*, 4 September, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/09/04/us-syria-crisis-obama-idUSBRE9830NS20130904> (accessed June 8, 2014).

¹⁰⁹ NBC News, "End of war in Iraq is major promise kept for Obama," *NBC News*, 21 October, 2011, http://firstread.nbcnews.com/_news/2011/10/21/8431848-end-of-war-in-iraq-is-major-promise-kept-for-obama (accessed June 8, 2014).

However, a few phrases later, the President indicated that another concern took precedence for him: “But we are the United States of America, and we cannot and must not turn a blind eye to what happened in Damascus” (White House 2013). So, although the President acknowledged American war-weariness, a factor that could have weighed against starting yet another military intervention, his concern of what had happened in Damascus seemed to override this factor.

However, not only a war-weary American public may have created doubts in the Administration. The risk of imperial overstretch, a situation in which a state (‘imperial’ refers to the empires that are central in Kennedy’s (1989) analysis) extends itself beyond its ability to maintain or expand its military and economic commitments, will also have crossed the minds of Washington policy-makers (Kennedy 1989). After having fought very costly wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (with the former not yet fully ended) and being in the midst of a power shift from the Atlantic to the Pacific,¹¹⁰ an intervention in Syria may have looked like a ‘gamble’. Political commentators also stressed Syria’s limited strategic importance to the US, compared to other states in the region, such as Egypt and Iran.¹¹¹ The limited strategic importance of Syria in the context of ongoing commitments and future security challenges may have eventually induced the Obama-administration to call off an intervention. This however, seems not to be a particularly plausible explanation. The assessment of Syria’s strategic importance would have logically come prior to the Administration’s announcements of strikes. One may reasonably assume that if Syria was indeed of a too limited strategic importance, it would not have ‘qualified’ for a US intervention. Based on this rationale, it is unlikely that Syria’s limited strategic importance to the US eventually dissuaded the US government from a strike against it.

World sentiment on US strikes against Syria was at best divided. Polls showed much skepticism about the strikes among Western publics, with majorities turned against an intervention.¹¹² At a G20-meeting in early September 2013, world leaders also issued caution about a military intervention in Syria and some of them openly opposed these plans. Russian President Putin was a leading opponent of any military option in Syria. In an opinion-editorial

¹¹⁰ Matt Schiavenza, “What Exactly Does It Mean That the U.S. Is Pivoting to Asia?” *The Atlantic*, 15 April, 2013, <http://www.foreignpolicy.org/content/obama-administrations-pivot-asia> (accessed June 8, 2014).

¹¹¹ FoxNews, “Rumsfeld on Syria, Obama's 'red line' and the world stage,” *FoxNews*, 29 August, 2013, <http://video.foxnews.com/v/2637175341001/rumsfeld-on-syria-obamas-red-line-and-the-world-stage/?intcmp=related#sp=show-clips> (accessed June 8, 2014).

¹¹² The Huffington Post, “World Public Opinion Sharply Opposed To Syria Strikes,” *The Huffington Post*, 5 September, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/05/world-public-opinion-syria_n_3876187.html (accessed June 8, 2014).

in the *New York Times*, he argued that US strikes against Syria would qualify as an ‘act of aggression.’¹¹³ Russia, however, was not the only one arguing against an intervention. Chinese President Xi Jinping attempted to dissuade President Obama from military action, telling him that “Beijing expected countries to think twice before acting.”¹¹⁴ Germany showed its reservations by not signing a statement at the end of the G-20 meeting, calling for a strong international response against the sarin attacks in Syria. The states that did sign (President Obama eventually convinced 10 fellow leaders to sign) did not agree on including support for military strikes in the statement. The watered-down agreement led President Putin to assert that “the only countries to support the use of force were Canada, Saudi-Arabia, France and Turkey,” an assertion that was obviously denied by the White House.¹¹⁵ In sum, the Obama-administration faced opposition against its plan for strikes against Syria from leading states at the G20-meeting and from sceptic publics in the West. However, the fact that President Obama resisted Russian pressure during the G-20 meeting and continued his effort to enlist the support of his colleagues makes it unlikely that the lack of global support was the decisive factor in dissuading the Obama-administration from an intervention in Syria.¹¹⁶

A final political consideration to be assessed is the attractiveness of the option of intervention at the time and potential alternatives to this option. For quite some time after the sarin attacks, ‘limited strikes’ against Syria were the only conceivable option to the Obama-administration. With such a clear crossing of President Obama’s red line, the US simply had to come up with a robust response.¹¹⁷ Besides, there was a sentiment in the Administration, most clearly expressed by US ambassador to the UN Samantha Power, that the US “had exhausted the alternatives.”¹¹⁸ Despite a year of diplomatic pressure, the Assad-regime was apparently bold enough to defy the US and still use chemical weapons, an act for which it had

¹¹³ Vladimir Putin, “A Plea for Caution From Russia,” *The New York Times*, 11 September, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/12/opinion/putin-plea-for-caution-from-russia-on-syria.html?_r=0 (accessed June 8, 2014).

¹¹⁴ Matt Spetalnick and Alexei Anishchuk, “Obama rejects G20 pressure to abandon Syria air strike plan,” *Reuters*, 6 September, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/09/06/us-russia-g-idUSBRE98315S20130906> (accessed June 8, 2014).

¹¹⁵ *Idem*

¹¹⁶ *Idem*

¹¹⁷ Karen DeYoung and Anne Gearan, “After Syria chemical allegations, Obama considering limited military strike,” *The Washington Post*, 26 August, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/kerry-obama-determined-to-hold-syria-accountable-for-using-chemical-weapons/2013/08/26/599450c2-0e70-11e3-8cdd-bcdc09410972_story.html (accessed June 8, 2014).

¹¹⁸ Dana Hughes, “Samantha Power on Syria: ‘We Have Exhausted’ Diplomatic-Only Options,” *ABC News*, 6 September, 2013, <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2013/09/samantha-power-on-syria-we-have-exhausted-diplomatic-only-options/> (accessed June 8, 2014).

to be held accountable.¹¹⁹ The Obama-administration consistently argued the case of ‘limited military strikes’ against Syria until a ‘rhetorical comment’ by Secretary of State John Kerry seemed to provide an opening on 9 September 2013. In response to a reporter’s question, Mr. Kerry stated that President Assad could avoid a U.S. military strike by surrendering “all his chemical weapons within a week.”¹²⁰ Although the US State Department was quick in downplaying Mr. Kerry’s comment, calling it a ‘rhetorical argument’, Russia seized the opportunity and proposed this option to Syria.¹²¹ It turned out to be a game-changer: Syria committed quickly to the plan. On Tuesday September 10, the day after the plan was proposed, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem stated that Syria was “ready to inform about the location of chemical weapons, halt the production of chemical weapons and show these objects” to the world.¹²²

The Obama-administration initially responded with cautious optimism to the Russian proposal: while welcoming the Russian proposal, the Administration warned against ‘stalling tactics’ and said it had to take this proposal “initially with a grain of salt.”¹²³ Still, President Obama announced that the Administration would “run this (the proposal) to ground” and that Secretary of State John Kerry would talk to his Russian counterpart to assess the ‘seriousness’ of the proposals. Significantly, on the same day President Obama first expressed doubts about his campaign in Congress for authorization, stating about the outcome of a vote: “I wouldn’t say I’m confident.”¹²⁴ Two days later, on September 11, the President put military action against Syria on hold and vowed to pursue diplomacy to remove Syria’s chemical weapons, stating that he had “a deeply held preference for peaceful solutions.”¹²⁵ On September 14, the US and Russia reached an agreement on the chemical disarmament of Syria by mid-2014.¹²⁶

¹¹⁹ *Idem*

¹²⁰ Arshad Mohammed and Andrew Osborn, “Kerry: Syrian surrender of chemical arms could stop U.S. attack,” *Reuters*, 9 September, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/09/09/us-syria-crisis-kerry-idUSBRE9880BV20130909> (accessed June 8, 2014).

¹²¹ Dan Roberts, “Syria crisis: Obama welcomes Russia’s chemical weapons proposal,” *The Guardian*, 10 September 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/09/us-russian-proposal-syria-chemical-weapons> (accessed June 8, 2014).

¹²² BBC, “Syria crisis: Barack Obama puts military strike on hold,” *BBC*, 11 September, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-24043751> (accessed June 8, 2014).

¹²³ Dan Roberts, “Syria crisis: Obama welcomes Russia’s chemical weapons proposal,” *The Guardian*, 10 September 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/09/us-russian-proposal-syria-chemical-weapons> (accessed June 8, 2014).

¹²⁴ *Idem*

¹²⁵ BBC, “Syria crisis: Barack Obama puts military strike on hold,” *BBC*, 11 September, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-24043751> (accessed June 8, 2014).

¹²⁶ BBC, “US and Russia agree Syria chemical weapons deal,” *BBC*, 14 September, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24091633> (accessed June 8, 2014).

At the end of the month, the agreement was officially sanctioned by a UN Security Council resolution.¹²⁷

The ‘sudden’ availability of a credible political alternative to strikes against Syria thus seems to have played an important role in dissuading the Obama-administration from an intervention. Whereas the Administration had consistently argued for strikes against Syria till September 9, it changed its tone after Russia came up with its proposal. The fact that it took the US government only five days to come to an agreement with the Russians on the proposal shows the Administration was eager to free itself from the ‘red line trap’.

Military Incentives Impacting on the US’ Willingness to Intervene in Syria

One of the most prominent military considerations in the lead-up to the strike must have been whether such a “limited, military strike” would be a) feasible and b) effective in terms of accomplishing its goals. On the feasibility of the strike it can be reasonably assumed that the US, given its preponderance in military power, would have been capable of conducting the strikes. However, it would be naïve to assume that that would have been an easy task. As General Dempsey emphasized in July 2013, “Assad’s regime could withstand limited air strikes,” and they would do little more than a “significant degradation of regime capabilities and an increase in regime desertions”.¹²⁸ Costs of such an operation would have run “in the billions.”¹²⁹ Reports released in 2012 by the British military think tank Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies (RUSI) and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) confirmed that “Western powers would face significantly bigger challenges in intervening against President Bashar Assad, both politically and militarily, than they did in Libya.”¹³⁰ In short, the US can be assumed to have been capable of conducting the strikes, but it would have been far from an easy task.

Second, serious questions about the effectiveness of the strikes have likely been raised. To assess the effectiveness, first the stated goals of the operation must be identified. In his August 31 address, President Obama summed up the goals of the announced strikes: to “hold the Assad regime accountable for their use of chemical weapons, deter this kind of behavior, and degrade their capacity to carry it out” (White House 2013). On 6 September 2013, UN

¹²⁷ UN Doc. S/RES/2118 (2013)

¹²⁸ Spencer Ackerman, “US military intervention in Syria would create 'unintended consequences',” *The Guardian*, 22 July, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/22/us-military-intervention-syria>

¹²⁹ *Idem*

¹³⁰ Vivienne Walt, “Why Syria Won't Get the Libya Treatment from the West,” *Time*, 18 March, 2012, <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2109372,00.html> (accessed June 6, 2014).

Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power also mentioned the importance of a signaling-effect: “We cannot afford to signal to North-Korea and Iran that the international community is unwilling to act to prevent proliferation or willing to tolerate the use of weapons of mass destruction (White House 2013a). In terms of enforcing accountability of the Assad-regime and deterring “this kind of behavior”, a US military strike would have showed a clear message to the world: from then on, any regime (or non-state actor) would have to take military retribution in mind when considering the use of weapons of mass destruction. Still, there were Congressmen who feared that the strikes would be ‘too symbolic’ and that they might actually embolden the Assad-regime.¹³¹

Another concern was the goal of degrading the Syrian’s regime’s capacity to carry out future chemical attacks. As General Dempsey stated, air strikes would lead to a “significant degradation of regime capabilities”, but this would fall short of preventing future use of these weapons.¹³² For that goal, “thousands of special operations forces and other ground forces would be needed to assault and secure critical sites”, and “a no-fly zone as well as air and missile strikes”, according to General Dempsey.¹³³ A much more effective and cost-efficient guarantee against the future use of chemical weapons was therefore not a military response, but a political solution, as the one that was eventually found.

Besides the limited effectiveness of air strikes on Syria in terms of preventing future use of chemical weapons in Syria, the main concern of the Pentagon has appeared to be the adjective ‘limited’ in the Administration’s plan of conducting a ‘limited, military strike’. According to Hersh (2014), the White House rejected multiple plans for targets for bombing designed by the Pentagon, because they would be insufficiently “painful” to the Assad regime (Hersh 2014). The target list was eventually getting longer every day and at last, it included ‘any military capabilities Assad had’, covering even electric power grids and oil and gas depots (Hersh 2014). According to the same source, General Dempsey’s initial view on the White House’s plan for a US strike is that it would be a ‘military blunder’. Hersh (2014) argued that it was the Joint Chiefs of Staff who eventually convinced the White House to change course, because it had indications that if the US would go ahead with its plans of a strike ‘the Middle East would go up in smoke’ if it was carried out.

¹³¹ Tom Shanker, C.J. Chivers and Michael Gordon, “Pentagon Sees Syrian Military, Not Chemical Sites, as Target,” *The New York Times*, 27 August, 2013, <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/refdaily?pass=463ef21123&id=521d8eb15> (accessed June 8, 2014).

¹³² Spencer Ackerman, “US military intervention in Syria would create 'unintended consequences',” *The Guardian*, 22 July, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/22/us-military-intervention-syria> (accessed June 8, 2014).

¹³³ *Idem*

It is important to re-emphasize that Hersh's account is controversial, only partly confirmed (based on limited and anonymous sources) and sometimes directly contradicts Washington's official version of events. However, Hersh's depiction of a skeptical General Dempsey, who was being concerned about the risks of escalation of the proposed strikes, is quite plausible. In fact, it is very much in line with the General's consistent opposition to any US military involvement in Syria, demonstrated by his comments in July 2013, but also on other occasions. The earlier cited Washington Post article also confirms the concerns within the US military about the risks of a military operation in Syria.¹³⁴ These observations increase the persuasiveness of the explanation that the risks and the 'potential unintended consequences' of strikes against Syria were leading in the Administration's decision to cancel these plans.

Weighing the Impact of International Incentives

In sum, it can be said that normative (both legal and moral) incentives strongly motivated the Obama-administration to hold the Assad-regime to account for its alleged use of chemical weapons in August 2013. The Administration also had a strong political motive to follow through on its threats, as the political credibility of President Obama and the US in general were at stake. After all, how would the US look in the world's eyes if it proved incapable or unwilling to enforce its own 'red line'? Other political considerations, such as the war-weariness of the American public and the risk of 'imperial overstretch' would have weighed against an intervention, but these factors, for reasons indicated, are unlikely to have played a decisive role in US decision-making in the direct aftermath of the sarin attacks. What remains is a strong incentive against intervention: the limited effectiveness of any military strike in avoiding another 'Ghouta-incident' and the risks and 'potential unintended consequences' associated with such a military operation. In the clash of moral and political incentives on the one hand and military and material incentives on the other hand, the latter seemed to have taken precedence at the end of the day. The Russian proposal, which constituted the first credible political alternative to the announced strikes, then provided the Obama-administration a way out of this foreign policy crisis in which it could 'save face'.

¹³⁴ Ernesto Londono, "U.S. military officers have deep doubts about impact, wisdom of a U.S. strike on Syria," *The Washington Post*, 29 August, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-military-officers-have-deep-doubts-about-impact-wisdom-of-a-us-strike-on-syria/2013/08/29/825dd5d4-10ee-11e3-b4cb-fd7ce041d814_story.html (accessed June 9, 2014).

Conclusion

The puzzling observation of high-level US officials' announcements of a military strike in Syria in August 2013 and, within a timespan of weeks, a complete cancellation of those plans motivated this research. The aim of this research was to assess which factors contributed to the shifting US willingness to intervene in Syria in the aftermath of the August 2013 sarin attacks and in *what way* those factors contributed. A distinction was made between domestic and international factors impacting on US-decision making on Syria. Given the abundance of international explanations found in the academic and public debate, this research opted for a domestic orientation. The influence of three domestic factors (institutional checks on the executive, the influence of bureaucratic politics and the role of public opinion) on US decision-making was assessed and this was finally contrasted to a more 'conventional' internationally-oriented hypothesis.

The evidence presented in the analysis supports the notion that US domestic factors mattered in the Obama-administration's decision-making on Syria. Congressional concerns played a role in the decision of the Administration to seek congressional approval instead of going ahead with the strikes on its own. The strong opposition voiced during the House hearing in September and the public announcements of Congressmen that they would vote against a use-of-force resolution also put pressure on the Administration's plans. The disagreements within the Obama-administration played an even more important role. There was no common perception of the situation in Syria within the Administration and there were disagreements about the adequacy of different policy responses. Since President Obama had drawn his 'red line', the White House and the State Department were inclined to push for *more* action in Syria, whereas the Defense Department continued its warnings against further US involvement. This came to a breaking point in the period after the sarin attacks, with multiple sources showing widespread discontent within the US military about the White House's proposed plans for strikes against Syria. The concerns of constituents were frequently mentioned by Congressmen in the lead-up to the planned strikes, but President's Obama's statements indicated that public opinion was not a leading factor in the Administration's decision-making on intervention.

On the international arena, there were important normative incentives for the Administration to enforce the President's red line. The sarin attacks constituted a violation of international law and a clash with American values, as President Obama emphasized in his address to the nation on Syria. The political credibility of the President and the US were also

at stake now that the President's red line was crossed. At the same time, there were strong military reservations about the proposed strikes. There were doubts about the effectiveness of the strikes in deterring future use of chemical weapons in Syria and the risks and potential unintended consequences associated with the plan were numerous. Many feared an escalation of the conflict. The Russian plan of Syria's chemical disarmament eventually provided a credible and even preferable alternative to the Administration's plans of strikes and the Obama-administration proved eager to seize this opportunity. Within the time spans of days, the US and Russia came to an agreement, which effectively ruled out the option of strikes against Syria.

When weighing the evidence, it seems that the disagreements within the Obama-administration formed the most important domestic determinant in US willingness to intervene, while, on the international arena, military considerations seem to have been most influential at the end of the day. The finding that domestic political factors mattered in the Administration's decision-making is significant, given the fact that this research focused on decision-making during an international crisis situation at its peak. This goes against Realist predictions that international factors are leading in states' behavior on the international arena, especially at times of international crises (Waltz 1979). This research also speaks to the literature dealing with 'audience costs' and it shows that, counterintuitively, not following through on earlier made commitments can sometimes be the preferable course of action. Whereas Tomz (2009) showed that leaders who do not follow through on threats made on the international arena are vulnerable to domestic backlash, following through in Syria would have meant that President Obama would have pursued a policy option that was strongly opposed by the American public.

This study leaves ample opportunity for future research. For instance, scholars could contrast different decision-making models (such as psychological and rational-choice models) to the 'bureaucratic politics'-model applied to decision-making on Syria in this research. This research is also of interest to scholars focusing on the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy making. This case could then be used as an instance of the relationship between the two during an international crisis, which could then be contrasted to their relationship in non-crisis situations. Finally, scholars of International Relations could bring the findings of this research in comparative perspective, by assessing the factors and processes identified here for a number of interventions in the past. This could then also illuminate why those interventions *did* take place, whereas the one in Syria eventually did not.

More on a policy note, this research has demonstrated that the President's 'red line' brought the Obama-administration in a very precarious position in the aftermath of the sarin attacks. The danger of drawing 'red lines' is that it strongly narrows the options available to governments dealing with foreign crises. The case exemplified this: since President Obama had drawn his red line, the White House was pushed in a direction that it had to do more and more to uphold its credibility. This inclination to do more was at odds with a more prudent course of action, as advocated by the Defense Department, which was sober about what US military power could achieve in this case compared to political and diplomatic means. Since flexibility is critical in responding to crises, it is highly advisable for the US to prevent early commitment to a certain policy path when dealing with future crises.

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