

The Syrian Crisis and its Implications for the Obama Administration’s Regional Strategy towards Iran

الأزمة السورية وانعكاساتها على استراتيجية إدارة أوباما الإقليمية تجاه إيران

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Abstract:

This paper aims to study the ongoing antagonism between the United States and Iran in the context of the Syrian crisis during Obama's administration. Iran's nuclear programme substantially threatened the Middle Eastern order and directly posed a more significant challenge for Washington by endangering its regional allies. Restoring peace and stability to the Middle East's increasingly unstable region was a crucial and long-term US national security goal that demanded an effective policy. The work sheds light on the Obama administration's strategy to counter Iran's regional influence through the Syrian conflict. Obama took advantage of the crisis to weaken Iran's position by inciting unrest that might destabilise Iran's closest Middle Eastern ally. The policy was based on the assumption that destabilising Syria would put more significant pressure on Iran to stop developing nuclear weapons. Accordingly, the work relied on the analytical descriptive approach to investigate the causes of the US involvement in the Syrian crisis to determine if the war was a crucial component of Washington's regional strategy against Iran. To that aim, the study examines Obama's actions and options in Syria to determine how much they impeded Iran's determination to increase its regional influence. Additionally, it explores how American officials used the Syrian crisis as part of a larger plan to reshape the Middle East's future.

Keywords: Syrian Crisis - Obama Administration - Iran's Nuclear Program - US National Security Interests - Middle Eastern Order

Introduction:

The Iranian nuclear program presents Washington with a broader challenge. Iran is a serious threat to the stability of the Middle East and directly threatens American allies there. Preventing the spread of Iranian influence is necessary to restore some degree of stability to the increasingly unsettled Middle East, a key and enduring US national security interest. The need to react to Iran's influence in the region has always been an urgent matter. By the time of Obama's inauguration, Iran emerged as one of the most pressing national security challenges for the United States. Given the ineffectiveness of Bush's foreign policy in changing behaviour, Obama

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offered to engage with Iran and make efforts to persuade Tehran to abandon its nuclear ambitions. To that end, the Obama’s Administration needed an effective strategy. The most crucial and most immediate choices would involve US policy in Syria. The Iranian challenge can be approached in a variety of ways. However, for Washington to be effective, Damascus and the rest of the Middle East must be the focal point of its ambitions and policy actions.

Syria is a complex nation in terms of its social, religious, and ethnic composition with a turbulent and frequently violent modern political history. The present Syrian conflict increasingly assumed both a regional and international dimension, and as a result, US interests became in danger. Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon are just a few of the US allies whose territories have also been affected by the Syrian turmoil. Despite being outmatched by the US military, Iran is, nonetheless, in a position to make any US intervention more difficult because it has a great interest in the al-Assad regime's military success. Therefore, Obama used the conflict to weaken or contain the regional position of the al-Assad regime’s main backers, Iran and the Lebanese Shia militant group Hezbollah, by supporting the rebels or attacking the regime directly.

Since the founding of the Islamic Republic, Syria has been Iran's closest state ally and the vital link between Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon, serving as a center for the transportation of people, supplies, and money. Syria's proximity to Israel, one of Iran's main enemies, further contributes to Iran's continued unwavering support for the al- regime. Iran considers the Assad government a crucial ally and equates Syria’s security with Iran’s security. At this point, the main questions that should be posed are: Was the Obama’s administration engagement in the Syrian crisis a part of its regional strategy against Iran? If yes, how did Washington respond to Iran's influence through the Syrian conflict? How was the Syrian crisis used to reshape the future of the Middle East? The aim of this study is to provide convincing answers to these questions based on the descriptive analytical approach.

1-US-Iran Antagonism: An Overview:

Official ties between the US and Iran have been strained for much of the last thirty years. The declaration by George W. Bush in 2002 that Iran was a member of the "axis of evil" was the most obvious indication of this stance. In fact, since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the two countries have had difficult and occasionally quite hostile relations. The US government has not been able to maintain normal diplomatic relations with the Islamic authority in Iran, perhaps with the exception of a brief détente under President Mohammad Khatami in the late 1990s. Washington characterized Iran as a rogue state governed by a fundamentalist regime during the 1979-1980 Iranian hostage crisis, the 1980-1988 Iran–Iraq War, and the current debate over Iran’s nuclear enrichment project¹.

George W. Bush's administration pursued a course of action that further harmed US-Iranian ties. His most significant failure in this regard was to label Iran as a part of the "axis of evil". The Middle East's anti-Western, and obviously anti-Israel, "axis of evil" is made up of Syria, Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas, and it is presumably committed to a war on the world stage to advance its members' extreme agenda². Rather than utilizing diplomatic efforts to create a dialogue, George W. Bush used the pressure of sanctions to get Iran to change course and give up what Washington saw as its pursuit of nuclear weapons, a strategy which proved unsuccessful³.

After Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Vice President Dick Cheney failed to diplomatically confront Iran, American foreign policy was eventually centered on undermining Iran's position. The George W. Bush administration changed its focus on the Middle East in order to weaken Iran, which is largely Shiite. The administration worked in secret with the

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Sunni-run government of Saudi Arabia in order to weaken Hezbollah, the Shiite organization that supported Iran in Lebanon⁴.

The George W. Bush administration and, in particular, its neo-conservative component believed that Iran represents a core threat to US interests in the region, a view that the pro-Israel lobby in Washington has always invoked. Israel's policy is motivated by its desire to prevent other countries in the region from gaining nuclear weapons, but it is also worried about Iran's support for Hezbollah militants in southern Lebanon⁵.

More important, perhaps, is the fact that Russia regards Iran as a crucial country in the Middle East due to Iran's geopolitical influence and cooperative foreign policy. Iran is also a key player for Russia because of its association with the Middle Eastern "axis of evil," which opposes the West. Russia's backing for Iran has increased its worth to the West, which is in desperate need of Russia's assistance in curbing Iran's nuclear ambitions⁶.

As 2011 drew to a close, the United States and Iran found themselves on a path towards war. The US waged an all-out economic war against the Iranian government, imposing harsh sanctions on its oil and banking sectors. Obama believed that if these sanctions were given more time to work, they would be able to deter Iran's nuclear program. The Obama administration's position on military action is no longer ambiguous. In a speech before the annual convention of AIPAC, the pro-Israel lobbying group, in March 2012, Obama said: '...I have a policy to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon'⁷. There is no denying that Obama's initial desire to rebalance US-Iranian relations had not gotten results. His policy ran into institutional resistance at home as well as Tehran's entrenched suspicion of US intentions since the Iranian Revolution. Republicans opposed any rapprochement, while Democrats believed that engagement would give Iran more time to develop nuclear weapons⁸.

In order to maintain pressure on Iran, Obama decided to keep economic sanctions. As a result, Obama, like his predecessor, pursued a dual-track policy toward Iran rather than the more nuanced approach he promised. Despite, he projected a new rhetorical posture towards Tehran, the Iranian leadership rejected Obama's engagement rhetoric and resented his dual-track approach. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader, dismissed Obama's gestures as empty talk: 'They say they extended their arms towards Iran. What kind of hand? If it is an iron hand covered with a velvet glove, then it will not make any good sense.' He concluded by saying: 'You change, and we will also change our behaviour, too.'⁹. It seems that the 30-years-old enmity between the two states has insufficient political will and a lack of trust between the United States and Iran.

2- Syria's Alliance with Iran: Tehran's Regional Ambitions in Damascus:

Tehran and Damascus have maintained close ties since the early years of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). Both governments are more or less similar in their political and religious leanings; Syria's Assad has been Tehran's closest Arab ally. These ties were further strengthened in the face of a common enemy, namely Saddam Hussein, during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 provided a further cause for their partnership, particularly that Iran and Syria have frequently disagreed with the US and its allies in the West. Additionally, they have shared similar attitudes and interests towards Israel, Palestine and resistance organizations like Hamas and Hezbollah. In addition, Syrian officials have regularly expressed their support for the Iranian nuclear program¹⁰. In brief, the long-lasting ties between the Islamic Republic and Syria have been a model of a great strategic alliance.

The foundations for Iran's anti-Western alliance, termed as the "Axis of Resistance," were established by its long-standing ties with Syria. Iran contributed to the growth of the Axis of

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Resistance over time by sponsoring radical organizations including Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and Hamas in the Palestinian Territories. This gave rise to the West’s concerns about potential threats from Iran’s increasing influence and potential effects of its growing might on the Middle East¹¹. Indeed, the "Axis of Resistance," as Iran refers to it, has grown into a regional strategic threat in recent years. Iran is strengthening its hold on the Middle Eastern countries and expanding its influence there, disturbing the regional order, threatening to eradicate the state of Israel, and undermining regional stability¹².

Iran has realized that its alliance with Syria gives it more strength to form a unified front against the American and Israeli policies in the region¹³. In this regard, Ali Akbar Velayati, Senior Advisor for Foreign Affairs to Iran’s Supreme Leader, stated on January 6, 2012: “The chain of resistance against Israel by Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, the new Iraqi government and Hamas passes through the Syrian highway... Syria is the golden ring of the chain of resistance against Israel.” Therefore, any damage to the resistance model will undermine Iran’s ability to project regional influence. This is of course true which explains why Syria peaks America’s attention. This was clearly illustrated by Patrick Seale when he argued that “those who aspire to control the Middle East must first win over Syria”¹⁴. According to Seale, the control over Syria could isolate other ambitious states such as Iran.

In reality, the relations between Syria and Iran have long been labeled by privacy and uniqueness due to the ideologies that separate them: the secularism of the Damascus regime and the Islamic regime in Tehran; as well as their combination with the interests, and the financial benefit from, the US and Israel. Syria views Iran as a pressure point in its negotiations with Israel, while Iran sees Syria as its gateway to the Arab world¹⁵.

Despite the fact that the Iranian-Syrian alliance is not based on shared religious beliefs, the partnership was successful. Eline Vaessen asserts that Syria and Iran did not share the same religious objectives, which made it simpler for each side to cling to its own ideology. The alliance with Iran and Hezbollah is crucial since both countries have a significant impact on al-Assad policies, particularly the civil conflict. Iran’s involvement in the conflict was intended to support al-Assad’s position in power or, alternatively, to build sectarian influence in order to continue to have a strong presence in Syria even if al-Assad regime were to fall¹⁶.

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has also been a source of support for al-Assad regime since he fears the formation of a Sunni-dominated rule in Damascus, which may empower the Sunni opposition in Iraq, and is highly dependent on Tehran for political and economic support. Nouri al-Maliki remains the most vocal state ally, going so far as to claim that any attack on Syria will be considered an attack on Iraq¹⁷. Syria plays a crucial role in Iran’s Middle Eastern foreign policy. Tehran made the decision to use all available political, military, and economic means to support the regime in Damascus¹⁸. Undoubtedly, Iran involvement alongside the Syrian allies is to protect its strategic interests.

The 2011 uprisings in Syria made clear the Iranian priorities in the country. Tehran, in particular as a prominent regional player, was deeply alarmed by the turmoil that was developing. Iran wished to keep al-Assad in power at least in some parts of Syria for the foreseeable future. For Iran, the preservation of the Syrian regime headed by al-Assad has been and is still a national security requirement of the highest order. Since his ascent to power, al-Assad has turned Syria into a tool for Iran, providing Hezbollah with a safe haven and a base of operations. Hezbollah’s capacity to rule Lebanon politically and maintain a sizable arsenal of rockets and missiles aimed at Israel has depended heavily on al-Assad’s Syria¹⁹.

The Syrian crisis provided an opportunity for Iran to play a regional role, especially with the Iran–US rapprochement during the Obama era, as Syria’s strategic importance resides in its role in securing the continuity of the land corridor from Tehran to Beirut and reaching the warm

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waters of the Mediterranean Sea. The Iranian role of supporting Assad has emerged as Iran saw Syria as an important window to the Arab region and as a strategic depth to it²⁰.

In this regard, the potential fall of the Assad regime would disturb the regional but also trans-regional balance of power at Iran's expense, leaving it essentially alone among a variety of overtly hostile rivals like Saudi Arabia and Israel and covertly hostile allies like Turkey²¹. Iranian leaders claim that there are those who try to exploit the events in the region in order to destabilize Syria, and to retaliate against the Syrian regime for reasons not related to what is happening in other Arab Spring countries²².

Iranian policymakers have made no secret of their determination to support and protect Syria under al-Assad from what is typically seen as a foreign conspiracy against an Islamic resistance front. This strange stance is clearly motivated by a deep-seated concern that any significant change in Syria that would weaken al-Assad's hold on his country would also weaken Iran's already precarious hold on the world stage²³.

3- The Geopolitics of the Syrian Crisis:

By most strategic important criteria, such as size, internal cohesion, and wealth, Syria would seem destined to be a minor role that is relatively simple for greater regional and international powers to marginalize and ignore. Despite the nation's vulnerability and weakness, Syria has always been a key factor in US foreign policy toward the greater Middle East. Recognizing this paradox is crucial to understanding the challenges Syrian politics poses to US policymakers²⁴. Towards this end, it is interesting to find an answer to the following question: To what extent is Syria a threat to American security in the Middle East?

Syria is a regional power of average size, one that lacks the military capabilities and type of NATO alliance that its sworn enemies Israel and Turkey have. Overall though, the Syrian administration has been successful in establishing a position for itself in regional politics by pragmatism and forming alliances with Iran and other Arab countries²⁵. There was no significant threat to its neighbours concerning its military prowess, especially Israel, even when the Soviet Union provided it with powerful military equipment during the Cold War²⁶.

By every practical measure, Syria is an underdeveloped country. It has a small economy and few natural resources, such as oil, or other resources that may make it affluent, like Kuwait or Saudi Arabia²⁷. In a similar vein, Hamoud Salhi maintained that Syria's economic situation disproves the notion that it may become a dangerous influence in the region. Syria lacks the economic depth necessary to sustain a war because of its weak economy, which impede any potential conflict²⁸.

Moreover, the only reason of acquiring WMD by the Syrian authorities is to ensure their own safety. It is uncertain whether Syria will use these weapons against other states. But it is obvious that using WMD would be incompatible with its well-established political agenda²⁹. There is no evidence to support the assumption that Syria is portrayed by the United States as a powerful and meddling state. Syria's role in the Middle East has been determined more or less by its geography, i.e. its stretched borders, and close proximity to Israel³⁰. All of this has made Syria a challenge for US policymakers seeking to chart an efficacious course for global counterterrorism efforts and develop a “grand strategy” for the greater Middle East³¹. Accordingly, it is not surprising that because of Syria's geopolitical features, recent events in Damascus have received a lot of American attention³². Syria may not therefore pose a threat to US security; rather, it was targeted in an official strategy.

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4- How has Syria been targeted?

Relying on the above arguments, it is fair to argue that it is exaggerated to say Syria poses a threat to American national interests in the Middle East, and this is only understandable in the context of American plans to reshape the region. Tehran believes that the United States, Israel, and its allies set out to undermine its position by fueling a rebellion that could destabilize its closest Middle Eastern partner. On this issue, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran’s supreme leader, offered these words: "In Syria the hand of America and Israel is evident. Wherever a movement is Islamic, populist, and anti-American, we support it"³³. Along the same lines, the Iranian officials’ declarations have centered on the Arab people's awareness that what is happening in Syria is an "American conspiracy to support the Zionist entity," and they have reaffirmed their confidence in Syria's capacity to continue playing its "historic role in the region"³⁴. On more general terms, Iran confirmed that the turmoil in Syria was due to pernicious external forces and an international conspiracy.

4.1- Washington’s Plan for a "New Middle East": Overthrowing Damascus's Regime

Syria and Washington’s ‘New Middle East’ put Syria in the context of the US plans for a ‘New Middle East’, the latest chapter in a longer history of the US attempts to dominate the region. Syria was supposed to be the next nation to fall after the wars of Afghanistan, Iraq and the total destruction of Libya. This was an objective that Washington and its allies in the region had long planned³⁵. In this respect, former US ambassador to Syria, Theodore Kattouf, claims that the George W. Bush administration “did not hesitate to let people know, through leaks and the like, that perhaps Syria was next.” In this way, Former CIA analyst Martha Kessler added: “I don’t think you can understand what has been done with regard to Syria in the last several years outside of the context of a belief among many in this [US] administration that this regime has to go”³⁶. In fact, a number of American actions might be seen as creating the grounds and conditions for the toppling of the Syrian regime.

The US policy toward Syria changed following the events of 9/11 and George W. Bush's declaration of the "war on terror." Despite several justifications being offered for the subsequent actions, a comprehensive strategy for the Middle East was rapidly implemented. In this regard, the former top US general Wesley Clark wrote in his memoirs: "We're going to take out seven countries in five years". Iran will be at the top of the list, which began with Iraq and Syria³⁷. To shed light on this measure, at the beginning of his second term, President George W. Bush decided to concentrate on Syria for the upcoming chapter of his administration's global war on terror. The Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, received a lot of the country's attention for his leadership qualities and strategic plans³⁸.

Since 1973, Syria has unavoidably been a key area of emphasis for the United States' continued efforts to place the region on a more peaceful and constructive geopolitical trajectory. This is true in terms of resolving the Arab-Israeli issue as well as more widely influencing the Middle East's overall power structure. Indeed, Syria has gained more significance for American policy especially in light of the United States' ongoing fight on terror since 9/11. Syria is regarded by the George W. Bush administration as belonging to the category of regimes that concurrently support terrorism, seek to acquire WMDs, and oppress their citizens³⁹.

It is crucial to mention that George W. Bush's global war on terror is largely inspired by the Project of a New American Century, which has been strongly articulated by the prominent figures in the George W. Bush administration’s foreign policy team. It is a worldview that has existed among American conservatives for several generations, but has just recently gained

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prominence in the ten years since 1995⁴⁰. More details about this project and its objectives will be further addressed in subsequent paragraphs.

4.2- Syria and the Project of New American Century (PNAC)

Shortly after the end of the Cold War, US neoconservative policymakers and intellectuals started to argue that the moment had come to create an American-dominated world order; a “Unipolar world”. They argued that instead of reducing military spending, the US should increase its military presence over the entire world, using its immense economic and military power to create a new Pax Americana. In fact, this ideology of American global dominance, which developed in the 1990s, gained momentum with the election of George W. Bush, and led to the reshaping of American foreign policy after September 11, 2001. It is worth noting that the ideology of American supremacy is a strategy to prevent the emergence of rival power blocs.

The main goal of the PNAC is to preserve America as the sole superpower by preventing the emergence of any regional or global rivals as well as avoiding the re-emergence of a new rival, whether in the Middle East, the former Soviet Union, Europe, Eurasia, East Asia, or Southwest Asia. The US would not accept any challengers in any region simply to be the sole pole of power. It should avoid any hostile power from dominating a region whose resources would be adequate to generate global power. To elaborate further, in the Middle East, in particular, the US made sure that it maintains its position as “the pre-dominant outside power”, namely to preserve US and western access to the region's oil. What is more than the strategic importance of the Middle East was that the security of Israel was “central to US interests in the region”⁴¹.

It is no secret that neoconservatives have been planning for a long time to reconfigure the Middle East. Many point to their organization Project for the 'New American Century', which urged George W. Bush on September 20, 2001 to remove Saddam from power despite the lack of evidence linking him directly to the 9/11 attacks⁴². Arguably, the elimination of Saddam is the first step to overthrow regimes in other states to reshape the Middle East.

Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, optimism for a New American Century significantly increased. After the subsequent military actions in Iraq, the US shifted to plan against Iraq’s neighboring countries, which increased antagonism to the US across the region. If Syria was a major potential target, the Pentagon leadership more clearly had Iran in their sights⁴³. In this background, it is interesting to note that the Iranian hostage crisis of 1980 is still deeply ingrained in the American psyche. It would be simple to portray Iran as a potential nuclear threat and to condemn its support for terrorism; there is still a strong well of support for Israel in the United States, which is strengthened by their shared views on Iran's military ambitions⁴⁴. Due to the US intense hostility toward the regime in Tehran, the assumption that it has a nuclear weapons program, and the suspicions of a growing Iran/Iraq Shi'a axis, Iran was targeted to be added to Iraq and Afghanistan⁴⁵.

The 2008 election and the victory of Barack Obama viewed as being close to the neoconservative movement, greatly confirmed the neoconservatives decline⁴⁶. However, several organizations and advocacy groups that shared PNAC's beliefs on US global dominance attempted to replicate PNAC's success by forming organizations with similar objectives, most notably after the inauguration of Obama. Many of these entities—such as the Coalition for Democracy in Iran, the Committee on the Present Danger, the Committee for the Liberation of Iraq, and the U.S. Committee on NATO, were formed as ad hoc pressure groups that were closely associated with PNAC. These attempts include the Foreign Policy Initiative, Keep Israel Safe, Keep America Safe, and the Emergency Committee for Israel. Promoting conflict with Iran has been one of these organisations' main objectives⁴⁷. In this respect, a key question is posed:

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How did the PNAC stand on Obama's foreign policy agenda towards Iran? Had Obama challenged the basic established priorities on which Middle East policy is traditionally based: American national interests and Israel security?

In responding to the above questions, Gerges suggested that Obama demonstrated more continuity with the past than real change in his foreign policy toward the Middle East. Obama did not pursue a transformational foreign policy and refrained from challenging the dominant narrative in Washington, despite a significant shift in approach from Bush's ideology of promoting democracy and the liberal deployment of force in world politics. He fully accepted the fundamental realist premises that underlying American foreign policy. In line with US foreign policy perspective, he embraced a centrist-realist stance toward the region. During his presidency, he aimed at retaining the status quo with a few minor corrections. But, it seems like Washington has changed Obama more than he has changed Washington⁴⁸.

Obama stated as early as 2006 that he is a realist, not an idealist like his predecessor. His pragmatic, realistic foreign policy adopted partnership, multilateralism, and shared security interests as its guiding principles. Obama's National Security Strategy (NSS) of 2010 advocated for a rebalance of American global responsibilities away from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan⁴⁹. As a realist, non-ideological president, his central goal is to minimize the damage to vital American interests and manage the transition⁵⁰.

5-The Impact of the Syrian Conflict on the US Regional Strategy Towards Iran:

The current deep turmoil in Syria and the growing rivalries among the big regional players pushed the Syrian crisis high on the international diplomatic agenda. Although this crisis began with unarmed civilian protest, over the past years it has morphed into an internationalized proxy war. Undoubtedly, the failure of regional regimes to contain and solve this conflict has led to turn it into an international predicament⁵¹. Along with other regional and global powers, the US and Iran are fighting a proxy war in Syria. Both see the raging conflict in Syria as an opportunity to score a decisive victory over the other, as Obama has stated publicly. In an interview with the Atlantic magazine in 2012, he admitted that his administration was working to 'accelerate' the fall of the Assad regime in Damascus because, as he put it bluntly, “If that happens, that will be a profound loss for Iran”. Tehran has also stated that overthrowing Assad is a "red line," and that any attack on Syria would be considered an attack on the Islamic Republic⁵².

Syria has once again come to the top of the US policy agenda mainly because it is a key player in the struggle for the region's future leadership, and how its future is shaped will have a significant impact on the strategic geography of the Middle East and have serious ramifications for the world's political landscape⁵³. As it is referred above, Syria is a small, under developing nation that Obama did not believe to be important to US vital interests. He has instead kept US involvement in Syria to a minimum, limiting it to giving the opposition political and financial backing while also engaging in economic warfare against the Assad regime⁵⁴. Since Syria has received greater attention by the United States, one may wonder: What did Obama seek to achieve in Syria? What was the national security objective? And how did it plan to go about achieving that objective? To put it differently, how did Obama respond to Iran's regional influence through the Syrian crisis?

5.1- Syria’s Regime Change: Objectives and Options

As noted above, the PNAC represents a new strategy for securing and reshaping the Middle East. Hence, what were the United States’ real motives for changing the regime in Syria? Following the invasion of Iraq in 2003, Syria was officially targeted by the US government for

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regime change. In fact, the use of Iraq as a platform for ongoing military operations served as the strategic justification for the invasion⁵⁵. On this issue, it is crucial to note that the US would benefit from a change in Syria’s government in at least three specific ways: The Sunni majority in the nation would undoubtedly control the next government. Given the Sunnis' historical animosity with the Shiite, such a regime would benefit the US by giving it more influence in regional politics, particularly with respect to Iran and Iraq⁵⁶. To highlight more on this, taking Syria over would create a Sunni-dominated state to balance out the Shia in Iraq and Iran and further shift the balance of power in favour of the US regional allies Israel and Turkey⁵⁷.

Moreover, the downfall or weakening of the Syrian regime would have negative repercussions on Iranian influence in Lebanon and the region on the basis that Syria is the geopolitical gateway to that influence. More specifically, Hezbollah, who serves as the head of the Lebanese Resistance to Israel, would be marginalized following a regime change in Damascus⁵⁸. The only Middle Eastern nation without US military bases would be Iran. The latter would be also the only state in the Middle East pursuing clear and open policy against the interests of the US. After Tehran, Washington would have complete dominance over the region, blocking potential rivals like Russia, and China⁵⁹.

Additionally, a pro-American government in Syria would shift the balance of power in favour of Israel. As a result, Israel and the United States would be in a position to push Syria to accept a peace agreement over the Golan Heights. Finally, once a pro-American regime was established, America would have finished the final phase of isolating Iran. This would further change the balance of power in the region in Israel's favour and eventually create fresh opportunities for the US to actively participate in overthrowing the Iranian government⁶⁰. In this context, Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah put the point briefly in 2011: “Nothing would weaken Iran more than losing Syria”⁶¹. It seems that the US government had plenty of reasons to change the Assad regime, especially his alliance with Iran and hostility to American corporate interests.

5.1.1- Sunni Belt or anti-Shiism Strategy

Unfortunately, the overthrow of Saddam’s Sunni regime had the unintended result of enhancing Iran’s regional dominance due to its influence on the current predominately Shiite government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in Iraq. As a result, Iran, Iraq, and Syria for the first time formed a de facto regional alliance⁶². The dominant view in the United States is that Iran won the Iraq war in 2003. Tehran, with its opportunistic ambitions, would seek to fill the power vacuum in post-invasion Iraq. From this perspective, Washington’s policy in the Middle East, particularly in the Persian Gulf, has been to maintain a balance of power while preventing regional supremacy⁶³. Under the new regional circumstances, establishing the de facto coalition by Iran is a key element in explaining what policymakers at the White House referred to the US new regional strategy as “redirection”⁶⁴.

For further clarification, the redirection policy called for a more direct conflict with Iran and the promotion of sectarian division among Shiite and Sunni Muslims. On one side, Iran has strong ties with Syria, Hezbollah, and the -Shiite-dominated government of Nouri al-Maliki. On the other side, the Gulf monarchies, also known as “Sunni states” have gained interests in the region and received full US support in an effort to push back Iran and its regional allies⁶⁵.

It was a very realistic fight for regional supremacy between two governments, involving allied Sunni powers against an emerging “Shi’a Crescent” that stretched from Iran to Israel’s borders. Riyadh used sectarianism as a tool to gain support for its foreign policy toward Iran inside the Gulf States and throughout the Arab world⁶⁶. It is hard to deny that the US and its close regional allies employed sectarianism as a means of achieving its objectives.

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As a matter of fact, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice began advocating for "creative chaos" in the region as early as 2005 in order to realize President George W. Bush's vision for a New Middle East. A new "divide and rule" strategy was devised by Washington, which relied on the strategies of the major powers. In 2006, Condoleezza Rice proposed the idea of a "Sunni belt" or bloc, ostensibly as a means of containing Iran. Saudi Arabia provided funding and plausible deniability for the US effort throughout the early stages of the death squad operation against Syria⁶⁷. The United States uses this regional actor in conjunction with Turkey to sustain its Sunni-based policy by encouraging divisions between Sunnis and Shiites.

Washington backed the Sunni Arab states' efforts to reverse Tehran's gains as a result of its close participation in the primarily Shi'a Iraq. However, when the Syrian conflict tipped in Assad's favor as the uprisings went on, and the Obama administration became determined to sign a nuclear agreement with Iran, the Sunnis began to believe that the Shi'a were not only in power but also effectively ruling four Arab capitals: Baghdad, Beirut, Damascus, and Sanaa. Some Sunnis held the US responsible for what Jordan's King Abdullah referred to as "the Shi'a Crescent" for well than a decade as part of this image. This is due to the support of the Shi'a-led regime by the US officials in Iraq during the early years of the uprisings⁶⁸.

Iran created the "Shiite crescent" and empowered the friendly Shiite factions in the region for more defensive and pragmatic reasons. Iran's aims are primarily oriented at building a secure environment at its immediate borders on the one hand and creating economic opportunities for strategic purposes on the other⁶⁹. Most critically, Tehran is concerned about the rise of the Sunni crescent or the pro-Western Sunni regimes stretching from Turkey to Syria. The worst-case scenario for Iran would be if the Ba'athist administration in Syria were to fall and be replaced by a Sunni fundamentalist government that is strongly hostile to Iran and the Shi'a and strongly associated with Saudi Arabia, Tehran's regional foe. The real nightmare for Iran, meanwhile, would be if the current governments in Baghdad and Damascus were overthrown and replaced by ones that were utterly antagonistic to Tehran. Iran has so far done everything in its power to keep al-Assad in power by providing him with all the support⁷⁰.

5.1.2- Sectarianism

It is worth noting that the goal of the New Middle East plan was to create tensions by exploiting divisions between communities, particularly in Iraq. In 2006, military planning that was based on divisions between "Arabs against Persians" (Iranians) was initiated. The most interesting aspect of the operation would be the creation of al-Qaeda in Iraq or the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), which would have Saudi support and carry out sectarian attacks on mosques and other public buildings in an effort to escalate tensions between neighbors. Senior Western officials have acknowledged in private that the monarchs of the other Gulf States and the many Saudi billionaires collectively comprise "the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist organizations internationally"⁷¹.

These Gulf monarchs and other important American allies are the main sponsors of sectarianism in the Middle East, who share the desire with the US to keep the region divided and weak⁷², and to counter Saudi Arabia's influence from growing. One of the main opponents of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy was Syria, which was Assad's Iranian supporter. The possibility of overthrowing al-Assad's regime has prompted Saudi Arabia to act and start supporting Sunni opposition groups. The conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia in Syria is yet another instance of a proxy war raging throughout the Middle East⁷³.

Both Iran and Saudi Arabia have used sectarianism as a foreign policy tool to pursue their national interests in the region. They have been found to be involved in a 'proxy war' in these

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countries by the way of supporting either the regime or the opposition forces⁷⁴. It seems, the role of the above major regional powers has been extremely critical in Syria.

The current conflict in Syria was bound to be both a regional sectarian conflict and the uprising of a people seeking to put an end to four decades of oppression and plunder. The war for Syria was bound to turn into a major sectarian conflict given Iran's size and dedication to the survival of the al-Assad administration⁷⁵. As a matter of fact, the anti-Iranian vision and Sunni-biased policy held by Saudi Arabia and Turkey and the support they receive from the United States remain important challenges for Syria. If the Syrian regime is overthrown, Iran's influence in the region will decline⁷⁶. All in all, the outcome of the conflict in Syria could intensify a wider Shi'a-versus-Sunni sectarian conflict in the region and have long-lasting effects on Middle Eastern stability and regional political dynamics.

5.1.3. Containment

The geostrategic balance of power in the region has changed, leaning in Tehran's favour as a result of Washington's escalating troubles in Iraq and Iran's capacity to play a dominating role in post-Saddam Iraq. From Riyadh's perspective, if Iran's expanding regional influence was not curbed, the kingdom would eventually be obliged to engage Tehran in combat in the Persian Gulf, which is its own strategic backyard. It is believed that Hezbollah and Hamas were essentially Tehran's geopolitical tools for invading and crashing the Arab globe, acting as proxy actors in this conflict with no independent will of their own, of course under the US encouragement and cooperation, as well as implicit support from Israel. Riyadh took the lead in balancing Tehran's expanding regional dominance. Tehran, on the other hand, tried to increase its regional influence and safeguard its newly acquired geopolitical position by forming the "Axis of Resistance," which was backed by Russia on the global stage⁷⁷.

Additionally, Syria was a key component of Saudi Arabia's plan to contain Iran's expanding regional influence. Like Washington, Riyadh saw Damascus as the bridge that Iran might use to project its political influence in the area and its military prowess along Israel's borders, as well as the umbilical land cord linking Tehran to Hezbollah and Hamas. Moreover, Tehran's alliance with Syria gave it political cover for its expanding influence and meddling in what Riyadh saw as primarily Arab matters. In order to punish Syria for its alliance with Iran and force it to sever ties with what was evolving under al-Assad into a very close but unbalanced relationship with Tehran, Riyadh was therefore resolved to undermine Syria's influence in every Arab corner of the world⁷⁸. In short, the containment policy has been instrumental in maintaining US hegemony in the region and preempting any threats that could damage US interests or those of its allies. In response to save Israel's security, Obama stated: “America's commitment to Israel's security is unshakeable. Our friendship with Israel is deep and enduring. And so we believe that any lasting peace must acknowledge the very real security concerns that Israel faces every single day.”⁽⁷⁹⁾. One may recapitulate, Obama did not alter the core aspects upon which Middle East policy has historically been built: “Israel first”.

Conclusion:

According to the preceding analysis, the Syrian crisis has evolved into a regional and international conflict due to Syria's geostrategic importance as a crucial and complicated state. After the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the American government designated Syria as a target for regime change. The attack on Syria was an unavoidable consequence of Washington's openly proclaimed intention to create a New Middle East in 2006. It has become an inevitable focal point for the United States' continued efforts to put the region on a more peaceful and beneficial

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geopolitical trajectory. This is true in terms of ensuring Israel's security as well as affecting the general balance of power in the Middle East.

As the US-Iranian relationship has been characterised by ongoing hostility owing to Iran's nuclear project, Iran's involvement in Syria impacts American foreign policy towards Tehran. This is because any increase in Iran's engagement in the region undermines US national and security interests, as well as those of its allies. Addressing Iran, Obama selected the Syrian conflict to undermine Tehran's regional ambitions. Creating chaos in Syria put a weight on Iran, the region's most powerful opponent. The policy was based on the belief that destabilising Syria would increase pressure on Iran to abandon its nuclear weapons programme which endangering the American's regional allies.

All in all, the US engagement in the Syrian conflict is part of the regional strategy against Iran. It was a premeditated effort by the US and its allies to undermine Iran's hand by fomenting an uprising that may bring down Iran's closest Middle Eastern ally. Consequently, the Obama administration's involvement in the Syrian crisis has been a prominent component of Washington's policy to maintain Unipolarity and so fulfil the PNAC's objectives, which can only be accomplished if there is a clear political justification.

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