



DIPLOMACY

COMMANDER'S BURDEN:  
President Barack Obama last week.  
Aides say tighter White House  
control is necessary in an era of  
complex threats like terrorism.  
REUTERS/JONATHAN ERNST

The White House's impulse to  
control all aspects of foreign  
policy backfired on the U.S.,  
current and former officials say

# How Syria policy stalled under the 'analyst in chief'

BY DAVID ROHDE AND WARREN STROBEL





**BLOWBACK:** The early decision not to arm anti-Assad rebels, say some officials, opened the way for the rise of Islamic State, which is now besieging the Syrian town of Kobani (above). **REUTERS/UMIT BEKAS**

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**T**hroughout 2012, as signs mounted that militants in Syria were growing stronger, the debate in the White House followed a pattern. In meeting after meeting, as officials from agencies outside the executive residence advocated arming pro-Western rebels or other forms of action, President Barack Obama's closest White House aides bluntly delivered the president's verdict: no.

"It became clear from the people very close to the president that he had deep, deep reservations about intervening in Syria," said Julianne Smith, who served as deputy national security advisor to Vice President Joe Biden. "And the likelihood of altering those views was low, very low."

This summer, events overwhelmed the status quo. In June, the radical group

Islamic State, after seizing wide swaths of Syria, conquered Iraq's second largest city and threatened Baghdad as the Iraqi army collapsed. The insurgents beheaded two American journalists, increasing U.S. public support for military action. Finally, U.S. intelligence agencies detected foreign jihadists who they believe had moved to Syria to plot attacks against the United States and Europe.

The radicals had undermined the administration's argument it had successfully ended the war in Iraq and were threatening Obama's record of defending the homeland. The jihadists, said Smith, "turned the debate on its head."

On September 18, Obama reversed his three-and-a-half-year opposition to military action in Syria and ordered open-ended airstrikes against militants. It wasn't his first U-turn on Syria. In August 2012,

Obama had warned President Bashar Assad that using chemical weapons was a "red line" Syria dare not cross; when evidence emerged that Damascus had gassed the rebels and civilians, Obama opted not to respond with force.

The bombing campaign, which could last for years, is a major course correction for a president with a famously cautious foreign policy.

Obama's handling of Syria – the early about-face, the repetitive debates, the turnabout in September – is emblematic, say current and former top U.S. officials, of his highly centralized, deliberative and often reactive foreign policy.

They say Obama and his inner circle made three fundamental mistakes. The withdrawal of all American troops from neighboring Iraq and the lack of a major effort to arm Syria's moderate rebels, they



TEAM: Vice President Joe Biden (left) and national security aides such as Tony Blinken and Susan Rice are seen as having more clout than White House outsiders such as Secretary of State John Kerry.

REUTERS/JONATHAN ERNST

say, gave Islamic State leeway to spread. Internal debates focused on the costs of U.S. intervention in Syria, while downplaying the risks of not intervening. And the White House underestimated the damage to U.S. credibility caused by Obama's making public threats to Assad and then failing to enforce them.

### "REAL CHOKEPOINT"

This week, former Defense Secretary and CIA director Leon Panetta joined Hillary Clinton and a growing list of former cabinet members and aides who said Obama made major mistakes in the Middle East. Panetta singled out the U.S. troop withdrawal from Iraq.

"It was clear to me – and many others," Panetta wrote in his memoir, "Worthy Battles," "that withdrawing all our forces would endanger the fragile stability then barely holding Iraq together."

Such arguments were rejected at the time inside the White House, where the foreign policy machine has grown dramatically in power under Obama and

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**Michele Flournoy**

Former under secretary of defense

cabinet members and their departments have felt marginalized.

The National Security Council staff, which coordinates U.S. defense, diplomatic and intelligence policy from inside the White House, has nearly doubled in size on his watch. It has gone from about 50 under George H.W. Bush to 100 under Bill Clinton, 200 under George W. Bush and about 370 under Obama.

Decisions small as well as large are made at the White House, often with scant influence from the Pentagon and State Department and their much larger teams of analysts and advisers. Senior Cabinet officials spend long hours in meetings debating tactics, not long-term strategy, the officials said.

Robert S. Ford, the former U.S. ambassador to Damascus, recalled long meetings to debate small issues, such as which Syrian opposition members he could meet with and whether it was okay to give cell phones, media training and management classes to a local Syrian government council controlled by the opposition.

Sometimes, this more centralized White House system becomes overwhelmed.

"There's a real choke point," said Michele Flournoy, who served as the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, the No. 3 Pentagon civilian, in Obama's first term. "There's only so much bandwidth and there's only so much they can handle at one time. So, things start to slow down."

Flournoy and other former officials who criticize the administration's approach concede that the most important decisions – using military force – must ultimately be the president's call. They argue, though, that intensified White House control has resulted in the United States being behind the curve, whether in trying to counter Russian propaganda about the Ukraine crisis or battle online recruitment by jihadists.

Syria, where the estimated death toll has topped 190,000, is cited as a prime example.

By the fall of 2012, covertly arming Syria's rebels had been accepted by Obama's top three national security Cabinet members – Clinton, Panetta and CIA chief David Petraeus – as the best way to slow radicalism in Syria. The president and his inner circle first rejected the advice, then mounted a small scale program to arm the rebels, and now, two years later, after Islamic State has seized swaths of Syria and Iraq, embrace the approach.

Obama's aides say tight White House coordination is a must in an era when the United States faces threats like terrorism, which requires harnessing the capabilities of the Pentagon, the U.S. intelligence community, the State Department and other agencies. It's the president's duty to take ultimate responsibility for matters of

war and peace, they say.

“Other than, of course, the men and women in uniform” and other officials deployed abroad, said Ben Rhodes, a White House deputy national security adviser, “only the president of the United States is assuming the risk of the cost of action.”

### WHITE HOUSE CONTROL

This account of Obama’s national security decision-making is based on interviews with more than 30 current and former U.S. government officials, who have served both Democratic and Republican administrations going back to President Richard Nixon.

In some ways, Obama’s closer control and the frequent marginalization of the State and Defense departments continues a trend begun under Bill Clinton and George W. Bush.

But under Obama, the centralization has gone further. It was the White House, not the Pentagon, that decided to send two additional Special Operations troops to Yemen. The White House, not the State Department, now oversees many details of U.S. embassy security – a reaction to Republican attacks over the lethal 2012 assault on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya. A decision to extend \$10 million in nonlethal aid to Ukraine also required White House vetting and approval.

On weightier issues, major decisions sometimes catch senior Cabinet officers unawares. One former senior U.S. official said Obama’s 2011 decision to abandon difficult troop negotiations with Baghdad and remove the last U.S. soldiers from Iraq surprised the Pentagon and was known only by the president and a small circle of aides.

The president, initially perceived as one of the greatest communicators of his generation, is now viewed as having done a poor job of defining and defending his foreign policy, polls indicate. A majority of Americans – 54 % – disapprove of Obama’s foreign policy performance, according to

“One of the biggest problems in Washington is to find the time to think strategically, not tactically.

**James Jones**

Former national security adviser

Reuters/Ipsos polling, one of the lowest ratings of his presidency.

Rhodes, one of Obama’s longest-serving national security aides, says a series of complex world crises, not policy mistakes, has driven down the president’s approval numbers. More broadly, he says, Obama has been right to be deliberative in the wake of costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

“What he’s always said is that if there’s a threat against us, we will act,” Rhodes said. “But when it comes to shaping events in cultures that are foreign to the United States we have to have some degree of realism.”

Obama has had notable national security successes. His record of protecting U.S. territory from attack remains largely unblemished. Current and former officials praise his policy on nuclear talks with Iran as clear and consistent. He is building a coalition against Islamic State that includes Arab nations participating in airstrikes with the United States, Britain, France and others.

And while past presidents faced grave dangers, most notably the possibility of Cold War Armageddon, for Obama the world is very different. The decisions he must make on using U.S. military force have multiplied. This reality, supporters say, is overlooked by detractors.

Obama has launched a humanitarian military intervention in Libya; overseen counter-terrorism operations in Pakistan, Libya, Somalia, Yemen, Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere; moved to end his

predecessor’s wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; wrestled with lethal threats to U.S. hostages and diplomatic posts; and sent the American military to West Africa to help tackle the Ebola virus and search for kidnapped Nigerian schoolgirls.

### “ANALYST IN CHIEF”

Current and former officials say the globalized world of Twitter and 24-7 news creates an expectation at home and abroad that the United States will quickly take a position on any foreign policy issue. The demand for instant American positions – and American leadership – can be overwhelming.

“One of the biggest problems in Washington,” said retired General James Jones, who was Obama’s national security advisor from 2009 to 2010, “is to find the time to think strategically, not tactically. You’d wake up and there would be a new crisis and you’d be scrambling to deal with them.”

Six years of grinding partisan warfare over foreign policy (and much else) have left Obama increasingly fatalistic about his critics.

While on vacation in Martha’s Vineyard in late August, he was widely criticized for golfing after making a condolence call to the family of murdered American journalist James Foley. Minutes after declaring Foley’s murderer – Islamic State – a “cancer” that had “no place in the 21st century,” Obama teed off with a campaign contributor, an old friend and a former NBA star.

Obama later told aides the criticism was inevitable. No matter what I do, he said, my enemies will attack me.

Far from being disengaged or indecisive on foreign affairs, as he is sometimes portrayed, Obama drives decision-making, say current and former officials.

Obama prepares thoroughly for meetings, has an encyclopedic memory and methodically dissects problems, former officials who have been with him in meetings say. The former law professor



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INNER CIRCLE: National Security Adviser Susan Rice (left) and deputy adviser Ben Rhodes are among Obama's longest-serving foreign policy aides.

REUTERS/KEVIN LAMARQUE

dominates foreign policy sessions, from small Oval Office gatherings to formal National Security Council meetings he chairs. Obama promoted open NSC debate, asked for dissenting opinions from cabinet members and called on junior officials who traditionally don't speak at such meetings, they said.

Some aides complained that alternative views on some subjects, such as Syria, had little impact on the thinking of the president and his inner circle. Despite the open debate, meetings involving even Cabinet secretaries were little more than "formal formalities," with decisions made by Obama and a handful of White House aides, one former senior U.S. official said.

Obama "considers himself to be analyst in chief, in addition to Commander in Chief," on certain issues, according to Fred Hof, a former State Department envoy on Syria. "He comes to a lot of the very fundamental judgments on his own, based on his own instincts, based on his own knowledge, based on his own biases, if you will."

The president's supporters say his approach is based on principle, not bias. He ran on a platform of winding down the Iraq War and made his views crystal-clear on military action in the Middle East. Obama

believed that the human and financial costs of large-scale interventions weren't worth the limited outcomes they produced. He held that U.S. force could not change the internal dynamics of countries in the region.

### THE SYRIA DEBATE

In August 2011, Obama issued a 620-word statement on Syria that his aides hoped would put him on the right side of history. After weeks of pressure from Congress, Syrian-Americans and allies in the Middle East and Europe, he called for Assad to "step aside."

"It is time for the Syrian people to determine their own destiny," Obama said.

Ford, ambassador to Syria from 2011 to 2014, said he supported the statement, but now regrets it because Washington didn't back up the words with action. He said the Syria case reflects a pattern in the administration of issuing public statements

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Former Syria envoy

without developing a clear policy.

When Assad refused to relinquish power, it became clear that the administration and its allies lacked a plan – or the political will – to forcibly remove him. American and European credibility in the region suffered.

Taking the removal of Assad into their own hands, Turkey and other Arab states overtly backed – or turned a blind eye to – the emergence of jihadist groups in Syria. American officials warned the countries that it would be impossible to control the militants, according to former U.S. officials. The Turks, according to one former official, replied that with Washington itself sitting on the sidelines, they had no choice but to back certain anti-Assad radicals.

As jihadists gained strength in the Syrian opposition in 2012, members of Obama's first-term cabinet began to support covert U.S. action in Syria.

In the summer of 2012, three senior advisors outside the White House – Clinton, Panetta and Petraeus – proposed that the CIA train and equip the relatively moderate Syrian rebels operating as the Free Syrian Army.

At about that time, Ford said, the Free Syrian Army was warning – and U.S. officials confirmed independently – that



DEBATE: Obama meeting Congressional leaders in September 2013 to discuss the Syria crisis. He backed away from military action at the time.  
REUTERS/LARRY DOWNING

militant groups were luring away fighters with cash. The more Western-friendly rebels had few funds to counter with.

In December 2012, Obama rejected the proposal.

Eight months later, in August 2013, U.S. intelligence concluded that Assad had used poison gas against rebels and civilians in a Damascus suburb, defying Obama's public warning against chemical attacks. For a week, Obama appeared on the verge of launching airstrikes. After a walk with Chief of Staff and longtime aide Denis McDonough on the White House grounds, Obama changed course without consulting his national security Cabinet members and announced he would seek Congress' approval, which never materialized. Instead, Washington and Moscow agreed on a deal to remove Syria's chemical arms.

The missile strike reversal was widely

cited by officials interviewed as the clearest example of Obama not engaging in a full Cabinet-level debate before making a strategic decision.

State Department officials warned for years that extremists would benefit from a power vacuum in Syria. "We were saying this area is going to be controlled by extremists and they'll link up with Iraq," said Ford. Obama made the wrong decision, Ford concludes. "It's clear, in retrospect, that they needed more help than to counter the extremism."

Another former official involved in Syria policy defended Obama. He said that in the early years of the Syrian conflict, with the long Iraq War fresh in their minds, Obama's senior lieutenants struggled to find any vital national interest that would merit American intervention. Warnings of terrorism were discussed, this official said. But the White

House responded that there were "more efficient and cheaper ways of dealing with the threat than intervening in Syria."

Smith, the former NSC aide, said the Obama years hold a lesson.

"The instinct is to centralize decision-making with the hope of exerting more control," she said. "But that often limits the U.S. government's agility and effectiveness at a time when those two traits are most needed."

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