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# President Obama's Approach to the Middle East and North Africa: Strategic Absence

Paul Williams

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PRESIDENT OBAMA’S APPROACH TO  
THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH  
AFRICA:  
STRATEGIC ABSENCE

*Paul Williams\**

*Many commentators argue that the White House does not have a policy regarding the Middle East and North Africa. Based on observations of the White House’s foreign policy decisions over a breadth of seven years, this article argues that The White House does have a clear policy and it is one of Strategic Absence. The term Strategic Absence is used to describe political behavior that arises from a belief that sometimes, in foreign affairs, it is better to be absent rather than present. Strategic Absence has led to a degradation of American influence in the Middle East and has contributed to deteriorating conflict situations in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya. The author describes the six core tenets of Strategic Absence and demonstrates, through case studies, that the Obama Administration has responded to challenges and threats to the United States’ strategic interests in Iraq, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria according to the parameters of the doctrine of Strategic Absence.*

CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION.....	84
II. EMPLOYING THE DOCTRINE OF STRATEGIC ABSENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA .....	86
III. THE CONSEQUENCES OF AMERICA’S STRATEGIC ABSENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA .....	95
IV. CONCLUSION .....	101

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\* Dr. Paul R. Williams is the Rebecca I. Grazier Professor of Law and International Relations at American University. He is also the cofounder and President of the Public International Law & Policy Group. Ph.D. Cambridge University, J.D. Stanford Law School, A.B. UC Davis. Dr. Williams has extensive experience advising parties involved in peace negotiations and post-conflict constitution drafting in Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen. Dr. Williams would like to thank Chelsea O’Donnell, Christin Coster, Johannes Munter, and Daniel Lyng for their help in preparing this article.

## I. INTRODUCTION

*Unfortunately, [a policy of] disengagement turns out not to work. A drones-first policy has stoked anti-American fervor from Pakistan to Yemen. Libya is on the brink of civil war. Syria has become "the most catastrophic humanitarian crisis any of us have seen in a generation," as Mr. Obama's U.N ambassador said.*

Fred Hiatt, Editor, Washington Post<sup>1</sup>

Think tank reports, op-eds by former senior government officials, and news reporting on leaks from current officials highlight the same theme: the degradation of American foreign policy interests in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).<sup>2</sup> Conflict and uncertainty reign across Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Turkey, fueled by violence, dissention, and the ever-increasing threats of ISIS, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and the PKK. In contrast, Egypt currently enjoys a measure of tranquility, the price of which was the reversal of the Arab Spring momentum and a return to heavy-handed governance by an elected military regime.

Many commentators accuse the White House of not having a policy vis-à-vis the Middle East and North Africa. In reality, however, the White House has a very clear, if not well-articulated, doctrine.

The White House has variously described its MENA doctrine as "Don't Do Stupid Stuff", or alternatively "Leading from Behind."<sup>3</sup>

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1. Fred Hiatt, *Iraq Highlights for Obama the Threat of Disengagement*, WASH. POST (June 15, 2014), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/fred-hiatt-iraq-highlights-for-obama-the-threat-of-disengagement/2014/06/15/414d2616-f311-11e3-bf76-447a5df6411f\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/fred-hiatt-iraq-highlights-for-obama-the-threat-of-disengagement/2014/06/15/414d2616-f311-11e3-bf76-447a5df6411f_story.html) [https://perma.cc/WS2Q-UJ8N].
  2. See Fred Hiatt, *Obama's Syria Achievement*, WASH. POST (Sept. 6, 2015), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/obamas-syria-achievement/2015/09/06/961b416a-50de-11e5-8c19-0b6825aa4a3a\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/obamas-syria-achievement/2015/09/06/961b416a-50de-11e5-8c19-0b6825aa4a3a_story.html) [https://perma.cc/DMV9-CQNX] (citing the Obama administration's seeming disinterest in Syria despite the mass displacement of its citizens and destruction of cultural monuments); see also Michael Crowley, *Obama's Mideast 'Free Fall'*, POLITICO (Mar. 26, 2015, 7:40 PM), <http://www.politico.com/story/2015/03/barack-obama-yemen-isil-middle-east-116440> [http://perma.cc/H5WT-NG27] (citing the instability in North Africa and America's withdrawal of troops from the Middle East).
  3. See Jim Acosta, *The Obama Doctrine: Inarticulate or Disengaged?*, CNN (Aug. 13, 2014, 8:31 PM), <http://www.cnn.com/2014/08/13/politics/obama-doctrine/index.html> [http://perma.cc/JQ27-D5RF] ("Don't Do Stupid Stuff"); see also Charles Krauthammer, *The Obama Doctrine: Leading From Behind*, WASH. POST (Apr. 28, 2011), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-obama-doctrine-leading->

From observing the White House's foreign policy decisions over a breadth of seven years, the doctrine can more fully be surmised to be one of Strategic Absence. The term Strategic Absence is used to describe political behavior that arises from a belief that sometimes, in foreign affairs, it is better to be absent rather than present.<sup>4</sup>

The White House's doctrine of Strategic Absence is built around the following core elements: narrowing the definition of American strategic interests;<sup>5</sup> avoiding the lure of human rights driven policy and actions;<sup>6</sup> shifting responsibility for international conflict management to regional actors and international partners while pursuing "partnership lite";<sup>7</sup> limiting belief in the United States' ability to positively affect change;<sup>8</sup> minimizing U.S. military involvement overseas while at the same time maximizing the use of unmanned aircraft systems (UAS);<sup>9</sup> and generally relying upon

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from-behind/2011/04/28/AFBCy18E\_story.html  
[<https://perma.cc/XM86-YTK8>].

4. See Aaron David Miller, *Obama's Egypt Policy Makes Perfect Sense*, FOREIGN POL'Y (Aug. 20, 2013), <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/08/20/obamas-egypt-policy-makes-perfect-sense/> [<http://perma.cc/L5VA-LHB2>] (demonstrating that the policy of strategic absence is at work in America's support of democratic transitions in Egypt but not, for instance, in Saudi Arabia).
5. See Zachary C. Shirkey, *America Can't Escape the Middle East*, NAT'L INT. (July 29, 2013), available at <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/america-cant-escape-the-middle-east-8787?page=2> [<http://perma.cc/SDP7-NJ5K>] (identifying "stable global energy markets and . . . countering security threats" as the primary American interests in the Middle East).
6. See Frederic C. Hof, *Obama, Open Your Eyes*, FOREIGN POL'Y (Sept. 9, 2015), <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/09/obama-open-your-eyes-syria-refugees-assad-europe/> [<http://perma.cc/ENS8-WLEG>] (indicating America's lack of human rights policies).
7. See, e.g., Jonathan Marcus, *Obama's Five Key Middle East Battlegrounds in 2015*, BBC NEWS (Jan. 7, 2015), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-30636655> [<http://perma.cc/V2GQ-TNT3>] (suggesting that the U.S. "remains important in forming coalitions" despite its "growing sense that the people of the [Middle East] must sort out their own problems.").
8. See David Greene, *Obama on Limitations He Faces in a Complicated World*, NPR (May 29, 2014, 5:11 AM), <http://www.npr.org/2014/05/29/316891557/obama-on-limitations-he-faces-in-a-complicated-world> [<http://perma.cc/XGB5-BLSL>] (assessing the limitations of American power in the realm of foreign relations).
9. See Shashank Bengali & David S. Cloud, *U.S. Drone Strikes Up Sharply in Afghanistan*, L.A. TIMES (Feb. 21, 2013), <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/feb/21/world/la-fg-afghanistan-drones-20130222> [<http://perma.cc/KS9J-W7GR>] ("[D]rone strikes . . . [are] on the rise even as American troops have pulled back from ground and air operations and pushed Afghan soldiers and police to the lead."); see also

accommodation (some would say appeasement) as a viable basis for accomplishing American strategic interests.<sup>10</sup>

## II. EMPLOYING THE DOCTRINE OF STRATEGIC ABSENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

During the past seven years, the United States has faced challenges to its strategic interests in Iraq, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria. The United States also faced existential threats from the non-state terrorist organizations of AQAP and ISIS. In each of these cases, the Obama Administration responded to these challenges and threats according to the parameters of its doctrine of Strategic Absence.

*American power can make a decisive difference, but we cannot do for Iraqis what they must do for themselves, nor can we take the place of Arab partners in securing their region.*

President Obama<sup>11</sup>

In Iraq, the adoption of the doctrine of Strategic Absence was born out of President Obama's frustration with and criticism of his predecessor's policies in the Middle East, his electoral promise to bring American troops home, and his limited belief in America's ability to influence events in Iraq.<sup>12</sup> His application of the doctrine

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Jack Nicas, *Why Some Drone Makers Hate the Word "Drone" and Want to Change It*, WALL ST. J. (Oct. 9, 2014, 4:53 PM), <http://www.wsj.com/articles/why-some-drone-makers-hate-the-word-drone-and-want-to-change-it-1412821801> [<http://perma.cc/DB7S-W3J7>] (supporting the use of "unmanned aircraft systems" in place of "drones").

10. See Maxime Fischer-Zernin, *The Obama Doctrine: Retrenchment and Accommodation*, DUKE POL. REV. (Oct. 2, 2014, 1:25 AM), <http://dukepoliticalreview.org/the-obama-doctrine-retrenchment-and-accommodation/> [<http://perma.cc/P9MZ-GBNG>] ("[T]he Obama grand strategy is one of 'overarching American retrenchment and accommodation internationally . . . .'"); see also Michael Barone, *Obama's Pattern of Appeasement*, NAT'L REV. (Dec. 10, 2013), <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/365857/obamas-pattern-appeasement-michael-barone> [<http://perma.cc/KJ5N-5ME2>] (suggesting that Obama's "pronounced" pattern of "truckling to longtime enemies" reflects a foreign policy characterized by appeasement).
11. President Barack Obama, Statement by the President on ISIL (Sept. 10, 2015, 9:01 PM) (transcript available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/statement-president-isil-1> [<https://perma.cc/3BYH-APRM>]).
12. Paul Shinkman, *The Obama Doctrine: Let the Mideast Fight Its Own Wars*, US NEWS (Apr. 2, 2015, 5:54 PM), <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/04/02/obamas-middle-east-policies-leave-saudi-arabia-iran-to-fight-it-out> [<http://perma.cc/BH89->

revolved around: minimizing American military engagement via the complete withdrawal of all American troops from Iraq;<sup>13</sup> shifting the burden of securing the country to the Iraqi Army via the transfer of substantial advanced weaponry to the Iraqi Army; disengaging from Iraq's political transition to an inclusive and pluralistic democracy;<sup>14</sup> and narrowing the definition of America's interest in "democratizing" Iraq to "trouble-free stability" in Iraq.<sup>15</sup>

*[Leading from behind is] so at odds with the John Wayne expectation for what America is in the world, -- -- [b]ut it's necessary for shepherding us through this phase.*

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- SWX4]; see Katie Sanders, *Obama Wanted to Keep 10,000 Troops in Iraq*, *ABC's Raddatz Claims*, PUNDITFACT (Aug. 24, 2014, 4:50 PM), <http://www.politifact.com/punditfact/statements/2014/aug/24/martha-raddatz/obama-wanted-keep-10000-troops-iraq-abcs-raddatz-c/> [<http://perma.cc/X6JS-8W2W>] (explaining that "Obama, who won office in 2008 partly for his pledge to end the war in Iraq, announced his own [troop withdrawal] plans a month after taking office.").
13. Sanders, *supra* note 12.
14. Felicia Schwartz & Julian Barnes, *U.S. Shifts Iraq Focus to Western Province*, *WALL ST. J.* (May 20, 2015), <http://www.wsj.com/articles/sunnis-need-more-iraqi-support-in-fighting-islamic-state-u-s-general-says-1432149953> [<http://perma.cc/U8FA-759Q>]; see Michael R. Gordon, *Plan Increases Role of G.I.'s in Iraq Training*, *N.Y. TIMES* (Nov. 23, 2007), [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/23/world/middleeast/23training.html?\\_r=0&pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/23/world/middleeast/23training.html?_r=0&pagewanted=all) [<http://perma.cc/3XKU-4EYP>] (describing the U.S. intention "to transfer more of the security burden in Iraq to the Iraqis . . ."); see also Shadi Hamid & Peter Mandaville, *The U.S. Is Giving Up on Middle East Democracy—and That's a Mistake*, *ATLANTIC* (Jan. 7, 2014), <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/01/the-us-is-giving-up-on-middle-east-democracy-and-thats-a-mistake/282890/> [<http://perma.cc/9J6E-FUE3>] (explaining "That the U.S. is fundamentally limited in its ability to influence the internal politics of the Arab states has been a constant theme with the Obama administration . . .").
15. See Hamid & Mandaville, *supra* note 14 (asserting that Obama has "de-prioritized democracy assistance" in the Middle East); Ben Hubbard, Robert Worth, & Michael Gordon, *Power Vacuum in Middle East Lifts Militants*, *N.Y. TIMES* (Jan. 4, 2014), [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/05/world/middleeast/power-vacuum-in-middle-east-lifts-militants.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/05/world/middleeast/power-vacuum-in-middle-east-lifts-militants.html?_r=0) [<http://perma.cc/W9A9-N8BF>] (discussing Anthony Blinken's statement that Iraq seemed "'more democratic' . . . than 'any time in recent history'"); see also President Barack Obama, *supra* note 11.

An adviser to President Obama<sup>16</sup>

In Libya, the Obama Administration coined the phrase “leading from behind” to describe its approach to protecting American strategic interests. This approach encompassed: narrowing the definition of American strategic interests to neutralizing Col. Qaddafi’s ability to kill civilians seeking to topple his regime;<sup>17</sup> partnership and burden sharing through the utilization of multilateral political and security institutions such as the United Nations Security Council, NATO, and the International Criminal Court;<sup>18</sup> and minimizing American military engagement by refusing to commit any troops to fight the Gaddafi regime<sup>19</sup> while emphasizing the limited nature of U.S. airstrikes throughout the campaign.

This latter point is illustrated by a congressional briefing provided in late June 2011.<sup>20</sup> From April to June, 2011, the U.S. conducted about 60 airstrikes and 30 drone strikes.<sup>21</sup> In the report to Congress, administration officials argued that those strikes were defensive actions simply meant to protect aircraft.<sup>22</sup> They made the case that the U.S. was not engaged in hostilities and instead played a “non-kinetic” role in the conflict, simply offering services such as refueling and surveillance to our regional partners.<sup>23</sup> As reported by the New York Times, the entire tone of the report was one in which the Obama administration took great pains to emphasize that the U.S.

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16. Ryan Lizza, *The Consequentialist*, NEW YORKER (May 2, 2011), <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/05/02/the-consequentialist> [<http://perma.cc/9DFC-SVCG>].
  17. See President Barack Obama, Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on Libya (Mar. 28, 2011) (transcript available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/28/remarks-president-address-nation-libya> [<https://perma.cc/BQ7X-CUFD>]) (summarizing the efforts to stabilize Benghazi).
  18. See Dan Bilefsky & Mark Landler, *As U.N. Backs Military Action in Libya, U.S. Role is Unclear*, N.Y. TIMES (Mar. 17, 2011), <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/18/world/africa/18nations.html?page-wanted=all> [<http://perma.cc/RH5C-5965>].
  19. Paul Harris, *Robert Gates: No US 'Boots on Ground' in Libya*, GUARDIAN (Mar. 31, 2011, 3:12 PM), <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/mar/31/gates-rules-out-american-troops-libya> [<http://perma.cc/XE9Q-ANM7>].
  20. WHITE HOUSE, UNITED STATES ACTIVITIES IN LIBYA 1 (2011).
  21. Charles Savage & Thom Shanker, *Scores of U.S. Strikes in Libya Followed Handoff to NATO*, N.Y. TIMES (June 20, 2011), [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/21/world/africa/21powers.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/21/world/africa/21powers.html?_r=0) [<http://perma.cc/CN67-E3L4>].
  22. WHITE HOUSE, *supra* note 20, at 9.
  23. WHITE HOUSE, *supra* note 20, at 25.

was not playing a leadership role in the region and, instead, ceded control to other players in the conflict.<sup>24</sup>

The doctrine of Strategic Absence continued into the post-conflict phase where the Obama administration was categorical about not engaging in peacekeeping or substantial efforts at nation building, leaving the work largely to the UN and emerging local democratic entities.<sup>25</sup>

*If there's one lesson this administration has learned, from President Obama's 2009 Cairo speech through the Arab Spring, it's that when it comes to this region, nothing happens in a linear way — and precious little is actually about us, which is a hard reality to accept.*

Senior State Department Official<sup>26</sup>

In Egypt, previous Administrations had always shown considerable deference to President Mubarak despite his human rights record.<sup>27</sup> This approach of avoiding the lure of human rights driven policy and actions, coupled with limited belief in America's ability to promote meaningful change formed the core of the Obama Administration's approach to Egypt as it progressed through various phases of the Arab Spring. President Obama's speech at Cairo University was a watershed moment in the minimization of a human rights narrative in the American-Egyptian relationship, going further than his predecessors in its avoidance of nearly any mention of human rights.<sup>28</sup> The subsequent embrace of President Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood regime, followed by a similar embrace of General Sisi

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24. See Charles Savage & Thom Shanker, *supra* note 21 (stating that “the United States’ role had not risen to the level of ‘hostilities,’ at least since it handed control of the mission over to NATO.”); see also WHITE HOUSE, *supra* note 20.
25. Dominic Tierney, *The Backlash Against Nation-Building*, 5 PRISM 13, 15 (2014).
26. Crowley, *supra* note 2.
27. *Obama Says Egypt's Transition 'Must Begin Now'*, CNN (Feb. 2, 2011, 8:51 AM), <http://www.cnn.com/2011/POLITICS/02/01/us.egypt.obama/> [<http://perma.cc/X3WS-V59G>].
28. See President Barack Obama, Remarks by the President at Cairo University (June 4, 2009, 1:10 PM) (transcript available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09> [<https://perma.cc/5PN6-TW4D>]) (emphasizing humanitarian notions but failing to mention or criticize Egypt's record of human rights abuses.).

and his military-centric regime, also followed this pattern of avoiding the lure of a human rights driven policy.<sup>29</sup>

Notably, the Obama Administration briefly tried to influence the behavior of the Sisi regime by suspending nearly \$500 million in military sales, but rather quickly abandoned this approach under the belief illustrated by the quote above that America had little to no ability to affect change in Egypt.<sup>30</sup>

*[I]f a JV team puts on Lakers uniforms, that doesn't make them Kobe Bryant. I think there is a distinction between the capacity and reach of a bin Laden and a network that is actively planning major terrorist plots against the homeland versus jihadists who are engaged in various local power struggles and disputes, often sectarian.*

President Obama<sup>31</sup>

In the case of ISIS, the Obama Administration laid the foundation for Strategic Absence by narrowly defining American strategic interest to exclude threats by local jihadi power struggles. The Administration also dramatically understated the threat posed by ISIS to the United States, placing it outside the narrowly defined sphere of American strategic interests. As it became necessary to utilize force to confront ISIS and prevent the collapse of Iraq, the Obama Administration relied on a partnership with the Iraqi Army, pro-Iranian militias, Syrian opposition forces, and our more traditional Kurdish allies.<sup>32</sup> For the air campaign, the Obama Administration assembled an effective coalition of European and Arab states.<sup>33</sup>

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29. Spencer Case, *How Obama Sided with the Muslim Brotherhood*, NAT'L REV. (July 3, 2014, 3:52 PM), <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/381947/how-obama-sided-muslim-brotherhood-spencer-case> [<http://perma.cc/CXQ9-XBUA>].
  30. Carlo Munoz, *US Suspends Military Sales, Aid to Egypt*, HILL (Oct. 9, 2013, 10:28 PM), <http://thehill.com/policy/defense/327635-us-suspends-military-sales-aid-to-egypt> [<http://perma.cc/587X-GFGL>].
  31. Glenn Kessler, *Spinning Obama's reference to Islamic State as a 'JV' team*, WASH. POST (Sept. 3, 2014), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/wp/2014/09/03/spinning-obamas-reference-to-isis-as-a-jv-team/> [<https://perma.cc/J7TQ-W5ZK>].
  32. Loveday Morris, *Pro-Iran Militias Take Upper Hand After U.S.-backed Forces Crumble in Anbar*, WASH. POST (May 30, 2015), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/pro-iran-militias-take-upper-hand-after-us-backed-forces-crumble-in-anbar/2015/05/30/22a3894a-03b8-11e5-93f4-f24d4af7f97d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/pro-iran-militias-take-upper-hand-after-us-backed-forces-crumble-in-anbar/2015/05/30/22a3894a-03b8-11e5-93f4-f24d4af7f97d_story.html) [<https://perma.cc/M7QU-WAE5>].
  33. See Tom Bowman, *Despite Coalition Partners, U.S. Has Done Most Airstrikes Against ISIS*, NPR (Feb. 6, 2015, 4:09 PM), available at

In the case of the Kurdish forces and the Syrian opposition forces, the approach was one of “partnership lite” in that the Americans resisted requests by the Kurdish forces to provide advanced weaponry, instead directing the weapons through Baghdad and the same military infrastructure that initially abandoned hundreds of advanced weapons systems to ISIS.<sup>34</sup> With the Syrian opposition, the Americans conditioned assistance on a commitment by its rebel allies to only attack ISIS and not the Syrian government forces that were responsible for the vast majority of attacks against Syrian civilians.<sup>35</sup> As a result of this “partnership lite,” only a few dozen Syrian rebel forces deployed inside Syria, and they were quickly defeated and scattered.<sup>36</sup>

When it became necessary to deploy American ground forces into Iraq in September 2014, President Obama was explicit about their limited role as catalysts for shifting the burden to our Iraqi partners.<sup>37</sup> In a prepared statement, the White House declared, “[t]hese American forces will not have a combat mission—we will not get dragged into another ground war in Iraq. But they are needed to support Iraqi and Kurdish forces with training, intelligence and equipment. We’ll also support Iraq’s efforts to stand up National Guard Units to help Sunni communities secure their own freedom from ISIL’s control.”<sup>38</sup>

*The truth is, you can dwell on Yemen, or you can recognize that we’re one agreement away from a game-changing, legacy-setting nuclear accord on Iran that tackles what every one agrees is the biggest threat to the region.*

Senior White House Official<sup>39</sup>

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<http://www.npr.org/2015/02/06/384345873/despite-coalition-partners-u-s-has-done-most-airstrikes-against-isis> [<http://perma.cc/D83P-7QFY>] (explaining that “[i]nside Syria, the United States and its partners have been conducting airstrikes since September.”).

34. Yaroslav Trofimov, *Kurdish Peshmerga Say They Need Weapons After ISIS Seizes Iraqi Arsenal*, WALL ST. J. (June 4, 2015, 7:06 AM), <http://www.wsj.com/articles/kurdish-peshmerga-say-they-need-weapons-after-isis-seizes-iraqi-arsenal-1433415999/> [<http://perma.cc/TE79-HJQB>].
35. Paul Shinkman, *Obama's 'New' Plan for Syria*, US NEWS (Oct. 9, 2015, 2:43 PM), <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/10/09/us-ends-failed-syrian-training-program-starts-arming-rebels-directly> [<http://perma.cc/NCS7-68P8>].
36. *Id.*
37. President Barack Obama, *supra* note 11.
38. President Barack Obama, *supra* note 11.
39. Crowley, *supra* note 2.

The Obama Administration placed Yemen outside the sphere of American strategic interests, as the crisis coincided with the zenith of the Iranian negotiations.<sup>40</sup> The Administration also deferred extensively to our Saudi, Qatari, Emirati, and Egyptian allies on how to conduct the campaign,<sup>41</sup> which many believe is a Saudi-Iranian proxy war, and has refused to be drawn into the conflict by the lure of human rights.

So committed is the Obama Administration to the perception of disengagement that it makes frequent calls for the parties to the Yemen crisis to cease hostilities, ignoring the fact that the United States is actually one of the parties, through its provision of the vast bulk of the weapons being used by the Saudi led coalition, as well as massive intelligence and logistics support, including aerial refueling for nearly all the missions.<sup>42</sup> Notably, some commentators assert the Administration has failed to reign in the Saudi-led coalition in order to appease the Arab states in the middle of the Iran deal negotiations.

*[I]t's undeniable that Syria today is the sum total of unattended consequences of a policy that has tried to hold it at arm's length, tried to commit humanitarian resources, but in an attempt to stand back from the situation has unintentionally, inadvertently contributed to a crisis that is now out of control.*

Ambassador Frederic Hof, Adviser on Syria to Secretary Clinton<sup>43</sup>

In the case of Syria, it initially appeared that the Obama Administration had abandoned the doctrine of Strategic Absence. President Obama both called for the ouster of President Assad<sup>44</sup> and

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40. See Guy Taylor & Tom Howell Jr., *Yemen Coup Shows Obama Lacks Middle East Terror Strategy, Critics Say*, WASH. TIMES (Jan. 25, 2015), <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/jan/25/yemen-coup-shows-obama-lacks-middle-east-terror-st/?page=all> [<http://perma.cc/S73Z-3VPS>] (outlining Yemen's importance in light of evolving US-Iran relationship).
41. Shinkman, *supra* note 12.
42. William D. Hartung, *It's Not Diplomacy, It's an Arms Fair*, FOREIGN POL'Y (May 14, 2015), <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/05/14/obama-arms-fair-camp-david-weapons-sales-gcc/> [<http://perma.cc/S5TX-SEM6>].
43. Lara Setrakian & Katarina Montgomery, *Ambassador Fred Hof on Buffer Zones, Rebel Groups, and U.S. ISIS Strategy*, SYRIA DEEPLY (Dec. 3, 2014), available at <http://www.syriadeeply.org/articles/2014/12/6455/ambassador-fred-hof-buffer-zones-rebel-groups-u-s-isis-strategy/> [<http://perma.cc/3RJQ-V4LE>].
44. Scott Wilson & Joby Warrick, *Assad must go, Obama says*, WASH. POST (Aug. 18, 2011), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/assad-must->

declared that the use of chemical weapons would be met with the use of force by the United States.<sup>45</sup>

With respect to calling for the ouster of President Assad, McClatchy News later revealed that the declaration of “Assad must go” was an effort by President Obama and his team to put themselves on the right side of history by declaring something he thought would happen soon anyway, without any intervention or effort from the United States.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, the United States was so convinced that Assad was on his way out that the Administration rejected a 2012 proposal by Russia that planned for Assad to cede power after peace talks had begun.<sup>47</sup>

The chemical red lines turned out to be an empty assertion. Since the red line was established, the Syrian Regime has used chemical weapons numerous times.<sup>48</sup> Russia did manage to broker a deal whereby Syria turned over the bulk of its chemical weapons stockpile for destruction, but to date there continue to be reports of the use of chlorine gas and other possible chemical agents.<sup>49</sup> Most commentators note that President Obama's efforts to enforce the red line evaporated when the British Parliament refused to endorse the use of force to prevent the use of chemical weapons.<sup>50</sup> Without the British in play,

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go-obama-says/2011/08/18/gIQAelheOJ\_story.html  
[<http://perma.cc/U6WL-KFF7>].

45. Catherine E. Shoichet & Tom Watkins, *Strike against Syria? Obama backs it, but wants Congress to vote*, CNN (Aug. 31, 2013, 10:40 PM), <http://www.cnn.com/2013/08/31/world/meast/syria-civil-war/> [<http://perma.cc/85X2-7NHZ>].
46. Hannah Allam, *The ‘magic words:’ How a simple phrase enmeshed the U.S. in Syria’s crisis*, MCCLATCHY DC (Aug. 13, 2015, 3:01 PM), <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article31016274.html> [<http://perma.cc/LL7T-PBD2>].
47. Julian Borger & Bastien Inzaurre, *West ‘ignored Russian offer in 2012 to have Syria’s Assad step aside,’* GUARDIAN (Sept. 15, 2015, 4:20 PM), <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/15/west-ignored-russian-offer-in-2012-to-have-syrias-assad-step-aside> [<http://perma.cc/8G9U-LRHY>].
48. Peter Baker & Eric Schmitt, *Traces of Chemicals in Syria Add to Pressure on Obama to Enforce a ‘Red Line,’* N.Y. TIMES (May 13, 2015), [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/14/world/middleeast/traces-of-chemicals-in-syria-add-to-pressure-on-obama-to-enforce-a-red-line.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/14/world/middleeast/traces-of-chemicals-in-syria-add-to-pressure-on-obama-to-enforce-a-red-line.html?_r=1) [<http://perma.cc/8PHG-JZHY>].
49. Michael Weiss, *Russia’s Return to the Middle East*, AM. INT. (Dec. 13, 2014), available at <http://www.the-american-interest.com/2013/12/13/russias-return-to-the-middle-east/> [<http://perma.cc/55DD-BBRK>].
50. Andrew Kreig, *OBAMA’S PUPPET STRINGS GET TANGLED ON SYRIA: ANALYSIS*, JUST. INTEGRITY PROJECT (Aug. 29, 2013),

President Obama would not be able to follow the same game plan as he had in Libya, with initial American leadership followed by a shift to leading from behind the British and French. On the eve of enforcing the red line, he unexpectedly turned to Congress for their permission; something he knew would not be forthcoming.<sup>51</sup>

The Obama Administration also deferred to its regional partners, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and shifted the burden of equipping and arming the rebel forces fighting against the Assad regime to them. Unfortunately, without American leadership and oversight these two allies readily armed numerous factions that turned out to be highly extreme. While eventually undertaking a program of arming and training, the Obama Administration has been steadfast in both its assertion that America can in fact do little to influence what is happening in Syria, and that America will not use military force in Syria, no matter how extreme the humanitarian situation may become.

Furthermore, the Administration's strategy to stay at arm's length from the conflict in Syria is evidenced by the White House's response to Russia's involvement in the conflict. While the White House tried to convince partners not to allow Russia to use their airspace to fly arms to Assad, the U.S. did not take a strong position when Iraq allowed Russia to use its airspace, even at a time when Iraq was relying on American air support for its very existence.<sup>52</sup> And now that Russia is using its newly established airbase in Syria to attack the rebel forces trained by the United States, the Obama Administration has launched a narrative of potential cooperation with Russia.

The durability of the doctrine of Strategic Absence may be attributed to the fact that at first there was reason to believe that the strategy worked. Iraq was doing relatively fine. The Gaddafi regime was destroyed in Libya and the country seemed to be headed to the right direction. The Arab Spring was in full swing, and Egypt was being released from the grip of Hosni Mubarak. However, while the policy may have seemed successful at first, its shortfalls and failures are now clear.

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*available at* <http://www.justice-integrity.org/faq/530-obama-s-puppet-strings-get-tangled-on-syria-analysis> [<http://perma.cc/W9DJ-DMD6>].

51. James Joyner, *Obama's Hamlet Act*, OUTSIDE BELTWAY (Sept. 1, 2013), <http://www.outsidethebeltway.com/obamas-hamlet-act/> [<http://perma.cc/XFA3-HFPZ>].
52. *Deny Airspace to Russian Flights to Syria, U.S. Urges Greece*, CBCNEWS WORLD (Sept. 7, 2015, 3:51 PM), <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/deny-airspace-to-russian-flights-to-syria-u-s-urges-greece-1.3218412> [<http://perma.cc/55CR-2W5G>].

### III. THE CONSEQUENCES OF AMERICA'S STRATEGIC ABSENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

The policy of Strategic Absence has not yielded the sought-after stability and protection of American interests. Instead, its consequences are far-reaching and destabilizing.<sup>53</sup>

*We're in a goddamn free fall here.*

James Jeffrey, President Obama's former Ambassador to Iraq<sup>54</sup>

Iraq is less stable than it was ten years ago.<sup>55</sup> The Iraqi security forces have nearly crumbled in the face of attacks by ISIS. ISIS has captured substantial amounts of highly advanced American weaponry transferred from departing U.S. forces to the Iraqi army. It is the most well-financed terrorist organization in the world, with an estimated \$2 billion in assets.<sup>56</sup> ISIS controls two major and strategically important cities. It, and other forces like it, has attracted more than 25,000 foreign fighters since 2011.<sup>57</sup> What remains of the backbone of the Iraqi military effort is primarily composed of Shiite militias.<sup>58</sup> Americans have put troops back on the ground in a combat environment,<sup>59</sup> and have been conducting around the clock airstrikes

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53. See, e.g., Paul Shinkman, *Absence of White House Strategy Makes ISIS, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan Wars Unwinnable*, U.S. NEWS (Jan. 27, 2015, 1:46 PM), <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/01/27/former-top-officers-absence-of-white-house-strategy-makes-isis-iraq-syria-afghanistan-wars-unwinnable> [<http://perma.cc/H2RM-F947>].
54. Crowley, *supra* note 2.
55. Hiatt, *supra* note 2.
56. *Syria Iraq: The Islamic State militant group*, BBC NEWS (Aug. 2, 2014), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24179084> [<http://perma.cc/26CY-RA3B>].
57. Jeremy Diamond, *Congressional Report: US has 'failed' to stop flow of foreign fighters to ISIS*, CNN POL. (Sept. 9, 2015, 8:30 PM), <http://www.cnn.com/2015/09/29/politics/foreign-fighters-isis-congressional-task-force-report/> [<http://perma.cc/E3G2-LHGW>].
58. Andrew Tilghman, *Real U.S. allies in Iraq difficult to identify, experts say*, MIL. TIMES (July 27, 2015, 3:46 PM), <http://www.militarytimes.com/story/military/2015/07/24/shiite-militias-allies-unclear/30528921/> [<http://perma.cc/6C57-PS74>].
59. Mike Dorning & David Lerman, *Obama Sending 450 Military Trainers to Base in Iraq's Anbar*, BLOOMBERG BUS. (June 10, 2015, 12:18 PM), <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-06-10/obama-to-send-450-military-trainers-to-iraq-white-house-says> [<http://perma.cc/RA76-MVDF>].

since March of 2015.<sup>60</sup> The political structure of Iraq seems to be on the verge of sectarian political deadlock, and it appears as if whatever political gains were made over the last ten years may be in danger of erosion.<sup>61</sup>

*[Our] policy of disengaging [in the Middle East] has contributed to the rise [of extremism].*

Ret. Gen. John Keane, former Vice Chief of Staff of the Army<sup>62</sup>

Libya is an ungoverned country in a three-way civil war. Following Gaddafi's fall in 2011, a burst of militias formed in the country.<sup>63</sup> Many of these militias have subsequently disbanded, but the remaining ones, state-affiliated and otherwise, continue to foster destabilization.<sup>64</sup> In addition, terrorist groups Al Qaeda and ISIS are active in Libya. With Libya in possession of thirty-eight percent of Africa's oil (48 billion barrels), whichever force gains ultimate control of Libya will have access to extremely valuable natural resources.<sup>65</sup> Should the future government use this wealth for destruction, Libya's proximity to Europe will be of major concern. Other Libyan neighbors have begun to take note of the country's greenhouse of instability.<sup>66</sup> In the wake of Islamic extremist shooting sprees in Tunisia, Tunisia's prime minister announced plans to build a 100-mile wall along its border with Libya to protect Tunisia from Libyan terrorists.<sup>67</sup>

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60. Nancy Youssef, *U.S. Backs Iran with Airstrikes Against ISIS*, DAILY BEAST (Mar. 25, 2015, 12:17 PM), <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/03/25/u-s-ready-to-back-iran-with-airstrikes-against-isis.html> [<http://perma.cc/YM93-MQX7>].
61. Political gains refer to Kurdish integration into Iraqi political structure and the incorporation of Sunni political interests.
62. Shinkman, *supra* note 53.
63. *Guide to key Libyan militias*, BBC NEWS (Oct. 9, 2015), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-19744533> [<http://perma.cc/6599-KKVW>].
64. *Id.*
65. Armin Rosen, *The Industry Behind the World's 9th-Largest Proven Oil Reserves has All but Collapsed*, BUS. INSIDER (Feb. 17, 2015, 4:28 PM), <http://www.businessinsider.com/libya-has-48-billion-barrels-of-oil-but-its-industry-has-almost-entirely-collapsed-2015-2> [<http://perma.cc/9UKF-XPM6>].
66. Jamie Dettmer, *Libya Crisis Draws in Worried Neighboring Nations*, VOICE AM. (Sept. 09, 2014, 8:24 AM), <http://www.voanews.com/content/libya-crisis-draws-in-worried-neighboring-nations/2443541.html> [<http://perma.cc/M4RY-J9BN>].
67. Carlotta Gall, *Tunisia Plans to Build Antiterrorism Wall Along Border with Libya*, N.Y. TIMES (July 8, 2015), <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/09/world/africa/tunisia-plans-to>

Yemen has become the battlefield in a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia that includes forces from the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Egypt.<sup>68</sup> Reports indicate that “there are over one million internally displaced people in Yemen . . . approximately 250,000 refugees and an estimated 21 million people in need [of humanitarian assistance].”<sup>69</sup>

Saudi airstrikes have caused significant civilian casualties, impeded the ability of humanitarian organizations to deliver aid, and crippled what was left of the country’s infrastructure.<sup>70</sup> The Saudi-led coalition enacted a blockade, resulting in shortages of much needed supplies for civilians.<sup>71</sup> Rupert Colville, a spokesman for the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, blamed the Saudi-led, and American-supported, coalition for the “naval blockade of Yemen’s main seaports,” highlighting that it is exacerbating the humanitarian crisis in Yemen that has left four out of five civilians in need.<sup>72</sup>

From late March to late September, 2015, over 2,355 civilians were killed.<sup>73</sup> There are increasing calls from the international community to make peace, in part because Yemen is a hotspot of activity for AQAP. Before the war in Yemen, AQAP was designated as the highest Al-Qaeda threat to the United States.<sup>74</sup> The destabilized conditions created by the war have created fertile conditions for the continued operation and growth of AQAP.

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[build-antiterrorism-wall-along-border-with-libya.html?\\_r=0](http://perma.cc/M6DF-PAUG)  
[<http://perma.cc/M6DF-PAUG>].

68. Muhammad Sahimi, *Saudi Attack on Yemen Aims to Prevent Thaw Between Iran and the West*, WORLD POST (May 30, 2015, 5:59 AM), [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/muhammad-sahimi/saudi-attack-yemen-iran-west\\_b\\_6965542.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/muhammad-sahimi/saudi-attack-yemen-iran-west_b_6965542.html) [<http://perma.cc/MU43-GPDK>].
69. *UNHCR Calls For Respect For Civilian Life as Rocket Attack Kills 12 Refugees Sheltering in Aden Kindergarten*, UNHCR (July 7, 2015), available at <http://www.unhcr.org/559bc5119.html> [<http://perma.cc/5R8W-KD7R>].
70. *Yemen Crisis: How Bad is the Humanitarian Situation?*, BBC NEWS (Aug. 24, 2015), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34011187> [<http://perma.cc/EHU3-MJFM>].
71. Kareem Fahim, *Saudis Face Mounting Pressure Over Civilian Deaths in Yemen Conflict*, N.Y. TIMES (Sept. 29, 2015), <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/30/world/middleeast/saudis-faces-mounting-pressure-over-civilian-deaths-in-yemen-conflict.html> [<http://perma.cc/CL9K-Y5W6>].
72. *Id.*
73. *Id.*
74. Jay Solomon & Siobhan Gorman, *U.S. Sees Threat of al Qaeda Attack*, WALL ST. J. (Aug. 3, 2013, 5:16 PM), <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887324635904578643890167811634> [<http://perma.cc/2S3K-C4J3>].

Egypt has gone back to the future. Many commentators note that the current government is more oppressive than the pre-Arab Spring Mubarak government.<sup>75</sup> Freedom of the press has disintegrated as more and more journalists are jailed or fined by the Egyptian government.<sup>76</sup> For example, Human Rights Watch asserted that the new Egyptian anti-terror law enacted in August, 2015 by President Sisi is so broad as to curtail fundamental freedoms.<sup>77</sup> Further, President Obama's reversal of the 2013 arms ban in March of 2015 is concerning given the poor training of Egyptian forces, as exemplified in the September 2015 killings of a dozen people who were traveling from a picnic in the desert.<sup>78</sup>

*This may be the most surprising of President Obama's foreign-policy legacies: not just that he presided over a humanitarian and cultural disaster of epochal proportions, but that he soothed the American people into feeling no responsibility for the tragedy.*

Fred Hiatt<sup>79</sup>

Syria is in crisis. In the wake of the civil war, four million refugees have fled the country, fueling Europe's largest refugee flux since

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75. Sarah Lynch, *Egypt faces a New, Harsher Kind of Repression*, USA TODAY (Nov. 23, 2014, 2:57 PM), <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2014/11/23/egypt-police-state-mubarak/19266761/> [<http://perma.cc/J9XA-6CHD>].
76. See Kareem Fahim, *Al Jazeera Journalists Sentenced to 3 Years in Prison in Egypt*, N.Y. TIMES (Aug. 29, 2015), <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/30/world/middleeast/al-jazeera-journalists-sentenced-to-3-years-in-prison-in-egypt.html> [<http://perma.cc/M4RU-VZ54>] (noting that in the summer of 2015, eighteen journalists—the highest number since 1990—imprisoned in Egypt); *Egypt Drops Two-Year Jail Penalty for Journalists in proposed Anti-Terror Law*, GUARDIAN (July 15, 2015, 10:54 PM), <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/16/egypt-drops-two-year-jail-penalty-for-journalists-in-proposed-anti-terror-law> [<http://perma.cc/E7SL-QJ74>] (removing the threat of jail in Egypt for journalists and instead, imposing heavy fines).
77. See *Egypt: Counterterrorism Law Erodes Basic Rights*, HUM. RTS. WATCH (Aug. 19, 2015), available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/08/19/egypt-counterterrorism-law-erodes-basic-rights> [<https://perma.cc/MVP2-W5DZ>] (arguing that Egypt's new counterterrorism law is so broadly worded that it could include civil disobedience and freedom of expression).
78. Jared Malsin, *Killing of Mexican Tourists Puts Scrutiny on Western Arms Sales to Egypt*, GUARDIAN (Sept. 24, 2015, 5:00 PM), <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/24/egypt-killing-tourists-western-arms-sales-scrutiny> [<http://perma.cc/R97Y-G35A>].
79. Hiatt, *supra* note 2.

WWII.<sup>80</sup> There are over eleven million internally displaced Syrians. Over 200,000 civilians have been killed.<sup>81</sup> ISIS occupies large swathes of the country.<sup>82</sup> Al-Qaeda, in the form of Al-Nusra, controls another large part of the country.<sup>83</sup> The Syrian government is dropping barrel bombs on the population.<sup>84</sup> Hezbollah is deployed and operating in Syria under the government's request.<sup>85</sup> Nearly three years after Obama declared that President Assad must go, Assad's position is as strong as it ever was.

A debilitated armed opposition movement fights against Assad, but has suffered attack by Russia, an ally of the current president.<sup>86</sup> Russia now has planes installed at Syria's Latakia air base.<sup>87</sup> Yet the

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80. *See Syria's Refugee Crisis in Numbers*, AMNESTY INT'L (Sept. 4, 2015, 7:28 PM), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/09/syrias-refugee-crisis-in-numbers/> [<https://perma.cc/LJZ6-8P3W>] (explaining that refugees have also fled to Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt); Charlotte Alfred, *What History Can Teach Us About The Worst Refugee Crisis Since WWII*, WORLD POST (Sept. 12, 2015, 10:24 AM), [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/alexander-betts-refugees-wwii\\_55f30f7ce4b077ca094edaec](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/alexander-betts-refugees-wwii_55f30f7ce4b077ca094edaec) [<http://perma.cc/MVY5-H9TH>].
  81. *Syria's Refugee Crisis in Numbers*, AMNESTY INT'L (Sept. 4, 2015, 7:28 PM), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/09/syrias-refugee-crisis-in-numbers/> [<https://perma.cc/LJZ6-8P3W>]; *Syria Crisis: Echo Factsheet*, EUR. COMM'N (Nov. 2015), [http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/syria\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/syria_en.pdf) [<http://perma.cc/F7FD-3LXL>].
  82. Kareem Shaheen, *ISIS' Controls 50% of Syria' after Seizing Historic City of Palmyra*, GUARDIAN (May 21, 2015, 5:05 PM), <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/21/isis-palmyra-syria-islamic-state> [<http://perma.cc/DBL9-G7AF>].
  83. Lizzie Dearden, *Jabhat al-Nusra Seizes Control of Major Syrian Government Stronghold with Rebel Coalition*, INDEPENDENT (Apr. 25, 2015), <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/jabhat-al-nusra-seizes-control-of-major-syrian-government-stronghold-with-jihadist-coalition-10203764.html> [<http://perma.cc/L73U-U88C>].
  84. Lucy Westcott, *United Nations: Assad's Barrel Bombs Continue to Kill Syrian Civilians*, NEWSWEEK (June 27, 2015, 11:45 AM), <http://www.newsweek.com/united-nations-assads-barrel-bombs-continue-kill-syrian-civilians-347782> [<http://perma.cc/PD6Y-RAS3>].
  85. *Assad Defends Presence of Hezbollah Fighters in Syria*, AL JAZEERA (Aug. 25, 2015, 11:52 PM), <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/08/assad-defends-presence-hezbollah-fighters-syria-150825203254106.html> [<http://perma.cc/VZK7-LKUQ>].
  86. *Syria Crisis: Russian Airstrikes Against Assad Enemies*, BBC NEWS (Sept. 30, 2015), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34399164> [<http://perma.cc/QD2R-K4J8>].
  87. Ed Payne, *Russia Launches First Airstrikes in Syria*, CNN (Sept. 30, 2015, 10:15 PM), <http://www.cnn.com/2015/09/30/politics/russia-syria-airstrikes-isis> [<http://perma.cc/4TWF-2YCB>].

super power, as demonstrated in its attack of opposition forces instead of ISIS,<sup>88</sup> has unclear intentions toward the terrorist organization.<sup>89</sup> As French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius opined, “The international coalition is striking [ISIS], France is striking [ISIS], Mr. Bashar al-Assad only a little bit, and for the moment, the Russians not at all.”<sup>90</sup> Not only is Russia not attacking ISIS, it is blatantly attacking U.S. allies in Syria,<sup>91</sup> thus undermining American strategic position in the region.

Former Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford retired from his post in February 2015 due to frustrations with the ineffectiveness of Obama's approach in the country.<sup>92</sup> He is open about the failure of the Obama policy to aid the country: “There really is nothing we can point to that's been very successful in our policy except the removal of about ninety-three percent of some of Assad's chemical materials. But now he's using chlorine gas against his opponents.”<sup>93</sup> Ford further stated his concerns regarding the threats posed by the Syrian crisis: “It is not a conflict that we should ignore, either on moral or on national security grounds, given the extremist threat to us and our friends.”<sup>94</sup>

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88. Anne Barnard & Andrew E. Kramer, *Russia Carries Out Airstrikes in Syria for 2nd Day*, N.Y. TIMES (Oct. 1, 2015), <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/02/world/middleeast/russia-syria-airstrikes-isis.html> [<http://perma.cc/N347-EN3P>].

89. See Paul McLeary & Adam Rawnsley, *Situation Report: Syrian Rebel Training Put on Ice*, FOREIGN POL'Y (Sept. 30, 2015, 7:58 AM), <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/30/situation-report-syrian-rebel-training-put-on-ice-top-defense-official-calls-it-quits-kunduz-under-attack-russia-readying-airstrikes-in-syria-ukraine-wants-attention-kony-search-breeds-suspect-f/> [<http://perma.cc/HFZ6-NEXB>] (citing calls from the international community to Russia to show that it is “serious about fighting the Islamic State . . .”).

90. *Id.*

91. See Liz Sly & Andrew Roth, *Russia Defends Syrian Airstrikes Amid Claims of Blows to U.S.-Backed Rebels*, WASH. POST (Oct. 1, 2015), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/russia-vehemently-defends-syrian-airstrikes-and-denies-targeting-us--backed-rebels/2015/10/01/cddada92-67af-11e5-bdb6-6861f4521205\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/russia-vehemently-defends-syrian-airstrikes-and-denies-targeting-us--backed-rebels/2015/10/01/cddada92-67af-11e5-bdb6-6861f4521205_story.html) [<https://perma.cc/K585-CWE9>] (citing a Russian strike that “hit the outskirts of Kafr Nabl, a town that has won renown as a symbol of the peaceful protest movement against Assad family rule . . . [and whose] local council . . . receives U.S. assistance . . .”).

92. See Mick Krever, *Former U.S. Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford: I Could No Longer “Defend the American Policy”*, CNN: AMANPOUR. (June 3, 2014, 10:48 AM), <http://amanpour.blogs.cnn.com/2014/06/03/former-u-s-ambassador-to-syria-i-could-no-longer-defend-the-american-policy-robert-ford/> [<http://perma.cc/6JPJ-CFH9>].

93. *Id.*

94. *Id.*

Ambassador and former Obama Administration official Fred Hof also recently expounded on the failures of the President's policy, stating that "the dead children washing up on Turkey's shores are a direct result of the Obama administration's failure to stop Bashar al-Assad's killing machine."<sup>95</sup>

The policy of Strategic Absence has also threatened to destabilize important American allies. Commentators assert that Jordan's and Lebanon's stability are under extreme threat because of the strain caused by the influx of refugees.<sup>96</sup> In addition, the relationship between the U.S. and long-term ally Israel appears to be at an extreme low.<sup>97</sup>

#### IV. CONCLUSION

For the past seven years, the U.S. has followed a coherent, clear strategy in the Middle East and North Africa. This doctrine, Strategic Absence, has been characterized by a decline in U.S. military commitments, shifting of the strategic lead to partners and regional actors, a narrowed view of national interest and the change the United States can make in the world, avoiding the lure of human rights considerations, and accommodating other international actors. However, the situation in Iraq, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Egypt demonstrates the detrimental effect this policy has had on the region, with humanitarian crises escalating in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, and an authoritarian military regime retaking power in Egypt. At the same time, the U.S. refuses to accept even partial responsibility for the situation, causing other international actors to take on an even larger role in international conflict management, even when they often played an instigating role in the conflict in the first place. In order to stabilize the Middle East and to bring peace to the region, the Obama administration, or its successor, will have to reverse course, and abandon the doctrine of strategic absence.

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95. Hof, *supra* note 6.

96. Fred Dews, *Syria's Refugee Crisis Threatens Regional Stability*, BROOKINGS INST. (Feb. 21, 2014, 3:36 PM), <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/brookings-now/posts/2014/02/syria-refugee-crisis-threatens-regional-stability> [<http://perma.cc/F2AP-C4XK>].

97. Jonathan Marcus, *Have Israel-US Relations Reached a New Low?*, BBC NEWS (June 19, 2015), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-33181782> [<http://perma.cc/CWG4-RP99>].