

**THE UNITED STATES' FAILURE IN IMPLEMENTING  
'RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT' IN THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR  
(BARACK OBAMA ERA 2011-2016)**

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**Abstract**

*This thesis is aimed to explain the factors that caused the United States' failure in implementing the 'Responsibility to Protect' in the Syrian Civil War during Barack Obama era in 2011-2016. This study uses two theoretical frameworks, including the Foreign Policy Decision-Making theory by William D. Coplin and the concept of Responsibility to Protect (RtoP) by the United Nations. By using the concept of RtoP, this study proves that the United States conducted a humanitarian intervention in Syria, one of which was the US-Turkey collaboration to build "safe zone area" in Turkish-Syrian Border. Besides, using the model by William D. Coplin, this study found that the factors that caused the United States' failure in implementing RtoP in Syria included domestic and international factors, such as the United States Congress and Americans did not supporting the intervention in Syria, the scarcity of the United States' economy and military resources, also Russia and China involvement in the Syrian Civil War until there was no international consensus, where the United Nations provided resolutions or other alternative solutions to stop the conflict.*

***Keywords: United States, Syrian Civil War, Responsibility to Protect***

## A. BACKGROUND

Syrian Civil War was a war that left hundreds of thousands death and half of the country's population displaced, destroying the country and forcing the involvement of global forces. Dreams and hopes remain among the rubble of the ruins after eight years of the Syrian war. The Syrian war was complicated, so it seemed impossible to count the number of Syrians killed by human rights groups. This conflict did not seem to indicate its intention to reach negotiations and agreements or at least experience de-escalation.

Moreover, foreign involvement in the Syrian Civil War referred to political, military and operational support to Syrian conflict parties and active foreign involvement. Most parties involved in the Syrian war were supported by

different kinds of foreign countries and non-Syrian entities. One of them was the United States' intervention in the Syrian Civil War.

Meanwhile, the diplomatic cables of the United States that were leaked by WikiLeaks showed that regime change could have been the United States government's covert foreign policy goal during the period before the civil war, even when President Barack Obama was engaged in a public relations with Syria's Bashar al-Assad.

In 2011, Barack Obama stated in his speech that the Syrian Government must stop the shooting of civilians and unjust arrests, free political prisoners, and allow human rights monitors to have access to cities like Dara'a. As a third-party interference abroad in responding to the humanitarian

crisis, the United States argued that the purpose of the intervention was to protect victims of human rights violations. (Myres, 2011)

The United States which was traumatized by Iraq and Afghanistan was determined to take extra care in any future military intervention. It was a matter of great caution that the West has shown. Military intervention by the United States has occurred in various ways. On the other hand, a country that was pro with the Assad Government planned to provide weapons and military to the Assad regime in the form of sophisticated land-to-air missiles.

Obama tried to restore strategic solvency, which he thought would be the most efficient American intervention in the arena. The audacity of Obama's commitment to change was rather

new ways of foreign policy thought. During a democratic primary debate in January 2008, he said that he did not just want to stop the war, but he wanted to end the mindset that causes war in the first place. About fifteen months later in Prague, Obama declared America's commitment to seeking peace and security in the nuclear-free globe.

However, in solving the crisis in Syria, America itself experienced many dilemmas. In his response, Foreign Minister John Kerry said that the decision taken by the opposition National Coalition was a big step. This war occurred in a portion of the world responsible for the production of energy, so it could have financial consequences and involve the entire energy industry in the Middle East. This was able to double petroleum prices worldwide and reduce the US GDP

by between 3% and 5%. (Lopez, 2015)

The United Nations through the United Nations Security Council had the policy of the Responsibility to Protect (RtoP), which became a common ground by UN member states. The Responsibility to Protect was a worldwide political commitment endorsing the four main issues in the prevention of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity by all the members of this World Summit in 2005. If a country fails to protect its population from threats of crimes against humanity on a massive scale such as war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and genocide, through the United Nations Security Council, the international community including countries can act jointly to protect the population of the country. (Orford, 2011)

Initially, the United States did not intervene directly in Syria, the CIA had supplied non-lethal assistance only to certain Syrian Army rebel groups, but later, the elected rebel commander received training, finance, and intelligence. However, at that time there were fatal attacks during the war, namely the Ghouta attack in Damascus in August 2013, and the Khan Al-Assal attack in Aleppo in March 2013. Due to the large arsenal of such weapons, the Syrian Baathist military was seen as the main suspect. The United States and the UNHRC Investigation Commission were carrying out a joint fact-finding mission in the chemical weapons attack. In 2013, when the Syrian Government used chemical weapons in its actions against civilians, for the first time the United States intervened directly in Syria.

As human rights, violation with the use of chemical weapons in the community in Syria, the United States was motivated to carry out humanitarian intervention by a sense of obligation. But, RtoP and certain implementations of it have come under criticism by some states and individuals during this decade.

Talking a little about one of the implementations of the *'Responsibility to Protect'* from the United States against Syrian Government is Turkey's policy on the repatriation of Syrian refugees to return to their respective countries in an orderly manner by the article 33 of the UNHCR convention related to the case of the Syrian Civil war. Article 33 was about the prohibition of expulsion or return ('refoulment').

In this policy, Turkey created a "safe zone" for refugees

from Syria which assisted by the American Government with the agreement of both parties and the Assad Government. The United States was helping by giving a donation to the Turkish Government to control refugees from Syria. Turkey and the United States will immediately establish a Joint Operations Centre in Turkey for the coordination and management of a planned safe zone in northern Syria. Also, the United States and Turkey launch joint patrols in planned Syria "safe zone".

In practice, based on data from the International Coalition for Responsibility to Protect, RtoP was used as a basis for resolving mass atrocity crimes cases. For example, in Libya, Rwanda, Central Africa, and now the Syrian Civil War. However, in the case of the Syrian Civil War since 2011, the

implementation of the RtoP to protect civilians in Syria was ineffective because the conflict did not end.

In the Washington Think Tank, Anthony Cordesman, a national security and defense expert in Syria said that American intervention in Syria ended in near-full failure. The death toll from the unresolved civil war in Syria is on the rise which displacing millions of refugees. Cordesman said that the United States never had a definite plan for Syria, both said they wanted Assad to resign but did not aggressively pursue that goal. (Cordesman, U.S Forces in the Middle East: Resources and Capabilities, 2019) Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C said:

*“The biggest winners are going to be Iran, ISIS (and) Assad. The biggest losers are going to be*

*the people of Syria, eventually Americans if ISIS comes back... our allies”.* (Al-Baidhani, 2015)

And Barack Obama on his speech stated:

*“..... For years, we’ve worked to stop the civil war in Syria and alleviate human suffering. It has been one of the hardest issues that I’ve faced as president.”* (POLITICO, 2016)

This statement confirmed that the implementation of the *Responsibility to Protect* from the United Nations to the United States has failed. The United States was regarded to have not completely conducted humanitarian intervention and the UN was unable to meet its responsibilities based on the *'Responsibility to Protect'* policy. One thing that can be agreed by conservatives, liberals, and centrists about United States

intervention that can make Syria's civil war worse, not even better.

Based on the explanation above, it is interesting to discuss when Responsibility to Protect cannot be implemented in Syria. RtoP is often used as a preference and involved in resolving humanitarian conflicts in several other countries, but why the Syrian Civil War occurred almost 9 years has not ended yet. This phenomenon becomes interesting as a basis for analyzing the failure in implementing the *'Responsibility to Protect'* in the Syrian Civil War by the United States.

## **B. ANALYSIS**

According to the Foreign Policy Decision-Making Theory by William D. Coplin, this study concludes that the factors that caused the United States' failure in implementing *'Responsibility to*

*Protect'* in the Syrian Civil war, which consists of domestic and international factors, those are:

**CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES BELIEVES THAT INTERVENING IN THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR WOULD BE DETRIMENTAL TO THE UNITED STATES' INTERNATIONAL CREDIBILITY.**

August 31, 2013 was the day when Barack Obama announced his policy decision to intervene directly in Syria. Barack Obama officially announced at Rose Garden for and spoke with Americans and the policy was made at his discretion with the support of the United Kingdom, France, Turkey, and Germany. Barack Obama has decided that the United States must act on the use of chemical weapons by Bashar Al-Assad to his people.

Based on data from HuffPost, using data compiled by ThinkProgress, 39 members voted "Yes/Leans Yes", they will definitely or likely vote in favor of the resolution, while there were 243 members voted "No/Lean No", they have either decisively ruled out supporting the measure or say they are unlikely to back it. Also, there were 151 members did not vote or "Undecided/Unknown."

The reason the Congress opposed Barack Obama to intervene in Syria; *First*, the United States has no national interest in Syria. Indeed, intervening in Syria could make matters worse and harm US interests by creating a failed state and igniting a struggle for power among competing for sectarian factions, some of which are deeply hostile to America and sympathetic to Al-Qaeda, U.S. intervention

could help bring some worst enemies to power.

*Second*, the involvement of the United States in Syria will worsen the situation, and foreign involvement tends to increase the killing of civilians and will prolong the war. Therefore, the Congress suggested to focus on helping refugees only and that was done by the United States in collaboration with Turkey to build a "safe zone area." *Third*, Congress rebuts the argument that it is necessary to go to war over the use of chemical weapons by Assad government, particularly when other regimes that used chemical weapons in the past were not then punished by the United States.

*Fourth*, Congress argues that intervention is not necessary to maintain the credibility of the United States. Congress prefers not



to get involved and only that can maintain the credibility of the United States and minimize damage and casualties. Harvard University international relations professor Stephen Walt said, “*wise leaders do not go to war without robust international and domestic support,*” which President Obama does not have. (Walt, An Open Letter to My Congressman About Syria, 2013)

However, Barack Obama ignored the declaration from Congress and there was no official agreement to intervene in Syria. But in the end, Obama acted to intervene directly by asking for support from Germany, the United Kingdom, and Turkey. Then, the United States Senate allowed President Barack Obama to use the military in the ongoing Syrian Civil War bypassing the Joint Resolution “The Authorization for the Use of

Military Force against the Government of Syria to Respond to Use of Chemical Weapons (S.J. Res 21)”. On September 6, 2013, the bill was submitted by Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid during a specially scheduled pro forma Senate session that took place during the last week of the August recess. The bill will only authorize 60 days of military action, with a possible extension of 30 days. The bill specifically will prohibit the use of ground troops. (Menendez, 2013)

However, this bill never received votes in the House of Representatives or the Senate. Congress still criticized that intervening in the Syrian Civil War would detrimental the United States’ international credibility, also, intervening in Syria was not only against Assad and his supporters but against the majority

of Americans. (Catalini & Bell, 2013)

## THE UNITED STATES' CITIZENS CRITICIZE BARACK OBAMA'S ACTION

Public opinion and mass media play this role through their contributions as *observers*, *participants*, and *catalysts*. (Ali, Khalid, & Khan, 2008) In other words, the American mass media has covered international affairs from the perspective of the United States which is considered as the interests and priorities of foreign policy.

Based on nationwide telephone interviews conducted September 6-8, 2013, by The New York Times with 1,011 adults, most of Americans viewed that US should not take the leading role among all other countries in trying to solve international conflicts.

They believed about 52 percent that Syrian government's use of chemical weapons poses a threat to the security of the United States. The United States and the international community are prepared to do about it because of what happened to those people, to those children, is not only a violation of international law, it is also a danger to the US security.

Another statement from Americans believes that the United States is still recovering from its involvement in Iraq. In the United States, 62 percent of those surveyed in a separate tracking poll agreed with a statement that said, "***The problems of Syria are none of our business.***"

Just as Congress argues, Americans require Barack Obama to stay focused on his own country. They stressed how Obama wants to

interfere in their conflict affairs even though there is still much to do in his own country. About 79 percent, Americans stated that Obama Administration have not clearly explained what the U.S.'s goals are in Syria.

Americans were more concerned about the U.S. military action in Syria. They believed that U.S. military action would kill or harm innocent civilians, would be a long and costly involvement, and would lead to a more widespread war in neighboring countries and other parts of the Middle East.

Furthermore, in Barack Obama's speech, he considered American's opinions and thought of solutions to resolve the conflict in Syria, but also solutions for his own country. He was forced to withdraw troops in Syria for the United States' security and a greater

counterattack from Bashar Al-Assad and his allies.

## **THE SCARCITY OF THE UNITED STATES' ECONOMY AND MILITARY RESOURCES**

*“While the military went to war, the country went into debt, with tax cuts and budget deficits. Consumers borrowed far more than they should have. America spent while our soldiers fought.”* (Stettler, 2014)

President Barack Obama has the biggest deficit during his presidency in the United States. FY 2017 is the end of the last budget whose deficit reached \$ 6.785 trillion. During his tenure as President, Barack Obama increased defense spending, which amounted to \$ 800 billion annually. Federal income has declined due to lower tax revenues from the 2008 financial crisis. (Buono, 2011)

Basically, intervention in Syria does not affect the United States budget. However, in response to the 9/11 Al-Qaeda terrorist attack, the United States budget has a deficit from the "War on Terror" military campaign launched by President George W. Bush. The War on Terror includes the war in Afghanistan and Iraq, this adds \$ 2.4 trillion to debt in the FY 2020 budget.

Barack Obama served during the Great Recession, so Barack Obama seeks to reduce or minimize the foreign budget because basically the budget for Afghanistan and Iraq has exceeded the limit. According to FY 2011 - FY 2016, the main budgets in defense are in Afghanistan and Iraq.

A survey published on Monday by the Eurasia Group Foundation gauging the foreign

policy preferences of US voters found that *"more than twice as many Americans want to decrease"* US defense spending than those who want to increase it, while half of those surveyed said the government should maintain its current level of military spending. (Piven, 2015)

Also, the United States seeks to give up some responsibility for resolving conflicts in Syria by working with Turkey and Saudi Arabia, such as creating a "safe zone area" and military bases on the Turkish-Syrian border. So, the budget is not fully covered by the United States, but other countries are also involved. This was done to reduce US military power in Syria.

In fact, the United States is the country with the largest military expenditure. This is four times greater than China's military

budget, and 10 times greater than Russia's defense spending. The United States is struggling to reduce the budget deficit without cutting military spending.

### **RUSSIA AND CHINA INVOLVEMENT IN THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR**

The UN Security Council seeks to issue resolutions on Syria, and a third draft submitted by Britain in July 2012 calling for economic sanctions against the Syrian Government based on chapter 7, basically allows other countries to intervene militarily. However, the UN resolutions failed because of consecutive vetoes by Russia and China.

From 2011 to 2016 Russia fully protected Syria from international pressure. The veto contains three resolutions; the *first* was to reject sanctions given from

European countries. *Second*, Russia and China were protecting Bashar Al Assad from descending from the Syrian President. *Third*, Russia and China were vetoing the results of the UN General Assembly on condemning the actions of the Syrian government regime.

*Fourth*, S/2014/348 draft resolution was the French draft resolution referring Syria to the ICC. *Fifth*, S/2016/846 was the vote on the draft resolution tabled by France and Spain that called for an end to all military flights over Aleppo was 11-2-2. It had 43 co-sponsors. Russia cast its fifth veto on a Syria draft resolution and China abstained, the first time it has not vetoed a Syria draft resolution alongside Russia. The *last* was the vetoed draft resolution submitted by Egypt, New Zealand and Spain that called for end-all attacks in Aleppo for seven days. (Nahlawi, 2019)

Russia and China remain committed to the principle of sovereignty and state-centric views on security, but they are very careful to accept the idea of RtoP in international affairs. The two countries did not question RtoP, but the different roles played by international actors in the crisis and who played the role of 'adjudicator'. In other words, who, when, how, and whose agreement the RtoP norms are practiced. And the two countries chose the roles of 'permission givers' and 'norm makers.' (Snetkov & Lanteigne, 2014)

In fact, the efforts made by the United States in intervention in Syria are very small compared to Russia and China.

One of Russia's efforts to help the Syrian Government is sending two Nikolai Filchenkov and

Tsezar Kunikov ships to the Port of Tartus in 2012. The shipments are aimed at maintaining the safety of Russian citizens residing in Syria. The two ships carried military personnel and several combat weapons, weapons to help the Syrian military. Also, Russia also sent 10 additional ships to Syria, bringing the total of ships sent by Russia to 12 ships including warships and aircraft carriers. Operation of the ships is considered as a show of strength to fight Western military hegemony in the world, especially in the Middle East.

Russia, assisted by China and Iran, helped protect Syria from the start of the conflict. Before this conflict took place, China itself assisted in the form of arms supply to Syria. In a 2011 US Congressional Research Service report, Russia and China are the

main suppliers of military weapons to Syria. The sale of weapons to Syria provides huge benefits for China and Russia. It is known that Russia has a profit of \$ 2.9 billion. Whereas China got \$ 300 million between 2003 and 2010 from arms supplies to Syria. (Kounalakis, 2016)

In practice, based on data from the International Coalition for Responsibility to Protect, RtoP was used as a basis for resolving mass atrocity crimes cases. For example, in Libya, Rwanda, Central Africa, and now the Syrian Civil War. But the implementation of RtoP in Rwanda was succeeded. It was because there was no Russian involvement in Rwanda.

However, this analysis can be compared with US intervention in the Vietnam War. Vietnam War was the biggest mistake of the

United States at that time. The conflict was caused by the cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union and North Korea. More than 3 million people including 58,000 American soldiers were killed in the war and the rest are Vietnamese civilians. Perhaps, if Russia is not involved in the Syrian conflict, there is a possibility that the United States will succeed in implementing RtoP in Syria.

However, the United Nations has permanent members, including China, France, Russia, Britain, and the United States. If one or two permanent members veto a resolution to intervene in Syria, nothing can be done without their consent because their veto power expresses a country's political will. There was no international consensus, where the United Nations provided resolutions or other alternative solutions to stop

the conflict between the Assad government and opposition groups in Syria. This was the most obvious obstacle.

Therefore, with vetoes from Russia and China that made the UN could not provide a resolution to continue interventions or other solutions, the United States could not do anything without the approval of the United Nations Security Council.

## **CONCLUSION**

After the United States was involved in the Syrian Civil War, Barack Obama as president felt a dilemma. Finally, in 2016 before Barack Obama resigned as president, Barack Obama withdrew US military forces from Syria.

It concluded that domestic factors could be affected Barack Obama to withdraw US military

troops in Syria, and Barack Obama considered the scarcity of the United States' military and economy resources. Also, the United States could not do anything with the Russia and China vetoes that made the United Nations could not issue a resolution to continue involved in the Syrian Civil War.

The failure of the United States in the Barack Obama era in 2011-2016 can be a lesson for the international community. There shall be activities scheduled at the international level so that a general agreement is reached regarding RtoP. Humanitarian actors need to be careful in responding to cases of humanitarian crises. Coercive actions do not always end in compliance. But it could be interrupting the actual development is very potential to be created.



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