

# Why the War on Bashar Al-Assad Never Happened

Written by Antone Christianson-Galina

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#### **Why did the United States not Conduct Air-Strikes to Overthrow Bashar Al-Assad in 2013?**

Bashar Al-Assad has survived the Arab Spring against all odds. He has staved off defeat by well organised rebel groups and avoided US airstrikes against his regime. In the fall of 2013, US President Barack Obama failed to spearhead a movement to punish Bashar Al-Assad for his use of chemical weapons. The United States did not launch air-strikes against Bashar Al-Assad due to the outcomes of two key variables: upcoming American congressional elections and Al-Assad's framing of the conflict as a sectarian one rather than one of democracy vs dictatorship. Bashar Al-Assad successfully avoided being presented as a Hitler analogue; instead, he presented himself as a president fighting against both Islamic extremism and sectarianism. I will first look at how the domestic political environment in the US made a move against Assad less likely. I will then examine how being cast in a mould affects decision making and thereafter examine how Assad used social media in 2013 to avoid being framed as another Hitler. Finally, I will look at how Bashar Al-Assad successfully framed the Syria conflict as a sectarian one.

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There were few signs that President Obama was going to ask for congressional approval for a strike against the Syrian regime until British Parliament rejected Prime Minister David Cameron's proposal to go to war. The power to declare war is technically a royal prerogative, not a parliamentary one, but the wars in both Iraq and Libya had parliamentary backing, creating a political precedent. Cameron, likely attempting to contrast himself with the supposedly gung-ho Tony Blair, continued the tradition. Across the Atlantic, in America, the parliamentary vote made congressional approval almost necessary for a declaration of war. Unlike in the United Kingdom, in the United States, Congress technically has the prerogative to declare war, but this prerogative has been largely ignored in the United States—with presidents declaring 'contingency operations' or other euphemisms. By asking for (optional) parliamentary approval, Cameron put pressure on Obama, who also had a constitutionally-enshrined pressure, to ask for congressional approval.

In the United States, the making of foreign policy is an inherently political activity; politicians, not unelected experts, make key foreign policy decisions. Decision makers must balance perceived national interest with perceived domestic interests and demands (Hagan 1995 pp. 3-4). Dr. Thomas Riese-Kappen, in *Public Opinion, Domestic Structure, and Foreign Policy in Liberal Democracies*, questions whether masses follow elites, or if elites follow masses. He concludes that only 20-30 percent of the public is concerned with foreign affairs (Riese-Kappen 1991 pp.480-481). In an open political system, public opinion matters more than in a closed political system (Wilkenfield 1980 pp.11). Rather than stay open or closed, the republican system moves in cycles in which the political system opens and closes for different actors and inputs within it. For Barack Obama, who had just won his second election with none in the future, public opinion and perception likely had limited bearing on his decision-making. For Congress, which was facing a looming election, the opposite was true. In the run-up to an election, they were highly sensitive to public opinion.

John Muller, in *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion*, argued that public opinion matters only during wars that have become protracted and costly in terms of casualty counts (Muller 1973). Wars in Yemen and Pakistan have been fought by the United States quietly and cheaply (both by blood and treasure) with drones. There has been only limited protest to these 'contingency operations'. Like in Yemen and Pakistan, the deposition of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya resulted in no US casualties and had a low price tag. Syria promised to be a different case. The Syrian army was substantially stronger (in 2011 320,000 vs 50,000) than Libya's, and the rebellion against Assad was more fragmented than that against Qaddafi (The Guardian, 2011). To many congressmen, the conflict in Syria seemed more likely to turn into a second Iraq War, in which case they would surely lose their seats.

Faced with time constraints, instead of computing all the variables to make the most logical decisions, decision makers often use analogies to determine the best course to take. Historical analogies define the nature of the current situation through their perceived similarity (Khong, 1992 pp. 19-29). They allow for schematic thinking, in which a hypothesised cognitive structure becomes a situational blueprint made up of character types, such as 'another Hitler' and scripts like 'balkanisation' or 'a trojan horse'. Analogies circumscribe the role of the actor and define the actor's appropriate status in the international system (Vertzberger 1986 pp.225-321).

Assad successfully avoided one of the most dangerous analogies: the Hitler analogy. When any leader of the free world is faced with a 'Hitler', the only rational choice is to depose the "Hitler" before he destabilises his region or commits a genocide, for example. Dictators who are successfully put into this Hitler mould often do not stay in power for long (eg. Saddam Hussein, Qaddafi). During the second Iraq war, when given a proposal on Sunni integration in Iraq, deputy secretary of defence Paul Wolfowitz wrote only three words, 'They are Nazis.' (Dodge 2012 pg. 466). In 2013, President Assad rarely presented himself in a military context and when he did, he did so in a non-hostile way, as a president visiting his country's troops, not as one of the troops. Most photos of him with troops show him in civilian garb, never holding a weapon. Rather than being shown fighting, he is seen encouraging the soldiers, (a civilian role) providing them with peaceful material support. Even in pictures posted of his days in the Syrian Army, he is not shown with a gun; he, instead, is shown with a shovel and blanket, helping set up camp. He supports the troops; he shakes their hands, but he is not a fighter.

By taking up the suit and tie, Assad takes up the uniform of the western leader. In his photos, especially on his Instagram, Assad abandons the podium and instead sits on chairs and couches. Though this position makes him

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look vulnerable, his open hands and legs denote a relaxed attitude (Lardner 2). In his pictures, he sits at a roughly even level with those he speaks with, bringing a sense of egalitarianism. The representations of Assad, with open palms denoting consensus-based leadership, make him seem clear-headed and logical. By largely avoiding the podium, Assad avoids one of the symbols of power closely associated with dictatorship: the podium. It puts a barrier between the speaker and the audience, eliminating any vulnerability. Its adornment with symbols of the state (fasces, flags, and predatory birds etc.) adds an aura of power and legitimacy but, still, creates a barrier between the audience and the speaker. Assad's self-presentation prevents easy categorisation as another Hitler in the minds of American decision makers.

Assad was able to successfully paint the conflict in Syria as a sectarian one, rather than one of dictator vs democracy. In this sectarian conflict, he paints himself as a bastion of secularism against Sunni radicals. Assad's self-representation also contrasts him with the stereotyped 'Islamic World'. The imagined and stereotyped 'Islamic World' is sexist, anti-education, anti-science and terrorist spawning (Kumar 2010 pp. 257). Assad's social media is filled with images of students receiving science and art awards, some by his headscarf-shy wife, Asma Al-Assad. By showing themselves supporting students who have succeeded in science and art, they show their support for those subjects. By rewarding girls, they show their support for women's education at the highest level. However, Assad has also paid a more direct role in making the conflict into a sectarian one, supporting Alawite militias and incorporating them directly into the National Guard (Fulton, Holliday, and Wyer 2013). By changing the conflict dynamics from dictator vs democracy to sectarianism, in which Assad brings together secular and minority forces against the same Sunni insurgents that had caused the US so much trouble in the second Iraq war, he changed the paradigm in which US decision makers operated. Rather than choose between dictator or democrat, they had to choose between secular or Sunni.

US elections left Congress hesitant to begin a war so similar to Iraq before elections. Al-Assad's presentation of the conflict as a sectarian one rather than a conflict of democracy vs dictator made it hard to categorise Assad as a second Hitler while exploiting US reluctance to enter another sectarian war. Assad avoided US airstrikes long enough for the Islamic State to become a threat. Once the Islamic State became a greater perceived threat to the US than Assad was, his presentation of himself as a Western leader made him a de-facto ally against the Islamic State. Now, US air strikes hit Assad's enemies, not his troops.

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