# Explaining Foreign Policy Change: The Role of Transnational Non-state Actors in the Syrian Civil War

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**Abstract:**

Foreign policy change deals with the shift – major or minor, in a state's foreign policy. The parameters that account for such a change are understood in terms of their nature (structural or conjunctural) and origin (domestic or international). Existing literature is inadequate to explain international conjunctural parameters in understanding foreign policy change. Most of the existing research concentrates on state as the unit of analysis. The impact of transnational non-state actors (NSA) to bring about such change is largely overlooked. It is hypothesized that the presence or absence of a transnational NSA in an international security crisis significantly influences the foreign policy decision of a state acting as a third-party. Specifically, the rise or presence of a transnational NSA realigns third-party foreign policy towards active intervention, whereas in its absence, interventions generally tend to be passive. This paper concentrates on the Syrian civil war as a case study to explain the influence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) as a transnational NSA in bringing about change in United States' foreign policy as a third-party in the conflict.

**Keywords:** Foreign Policy Change, Third party, Non-State Actors, Syrian Civil War, ISIS, United States' Foreign Policy

## Introduction

Change is a pervasive quality of a state's foreign policy. The impact that a foreign policy change has on the initiating state and its domestic constituents, along with its relation to other states is unquestionable. Hence, it is intriguing to analyze the shift, whether major and minor, in a state's foreign policy as well as the factors that bring about such an outcome. While the literature on foreign policy change is still in its nascent stage, international conjunctural developments are particularly ignored in relevant foreign policy analyses, irrespective of its

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immense significance. Most of the work concentrates on state as the unit of analysis. The influence of transnational non-state actors (NSA) in foreign policy is undeniable. This paper is an attempt to understand this influence.

It hypothesizes that the presence or absence of a transnational NSA in an international security crisis significantly influences the foreign policy of a state acting as a third-party. Specifically, the rise or presence of a transnational NSA in an international security crisis realigns third-party foreign policy towards active intervention, whereas in its absence, interventions tend to be passive. This paper concentrates on the Syrian civil war as a case study to analyze the influence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) as a transnational NSA in bringing about change in United States' foreign policy as a third-party in the conflict. It proceeds by reviewing the existing literature on foreign policy change, followed by the theoretical discussion on the impact of the presence or absence of transnational NSAs on the foreign policy of a third-party state. For the empirical analysis, the Syrian civil war (2011-2019) is used as a case-study to grapple with the impact of ISIS as a transnational NSA and its role in realigning United States' foreign policy. The concluding section deals with the limitations of this paper and points out some future avenues of research.

## Foreign Policy Change

It is imperative to briefly discuss 'foreign policy' before delving deep into 'foreign policy change'. Foreign policy is regarded as "a set of goals, directives, intentions, formulated by persons in official or authoritative positions, directed at some actor or condition in the environment beyond the sovereign nation state, for the purpose of affecting the target in the manner desired by the policymakers." (Cohen and Harris, 1975). Rosati et al. (1994) regards foreign policy as "the scope and collection of goals, strategies and instruments that are selected by governmental policymakers to respond abroad to the present and future environment." According to conventional wisdom, foreign policy is characterized by continuity rather than change. It is geared towards maintaining the status quo. A state's foreign policy mirrors the principles that it upholds and thus, foreign policy does not manifest much variation (Holsti, 1982; Rosati et al., 1994).

However, with the end of the Cold war and the subsequent changes in international politics that followed, this line of argument became questionable. While scholars are more inclined to study stability and inertia rather than transition from one state of affairs to the other (Gustavsson, 1999), under certain conditions, a state needs to change its foreign policy. This is especially true in terms of domestic or international security crisis. Blavoukos and Bourantonis

(2017) enumerate two cases of major foreign policy realignment. The first deals with the Greek-Turkish rapprochement in the late 1990s, where Greece adopted a policy of engagement in its bilateral disputes with Turkey, shifting from its past confrontational standpoint. The second case entails Israeli foreign policy reorientation in the early 1990s vis-à-vis Palestinians with the signing of the Oslo Peace Agreement.

Foreign policy change is a little addressed topic on its own (Holsti, 1982; Hermann, 1990; Welch, 2005). Existing literature on the topic can be thematically organized under three heads – inductive contributions with a focus on independent and intervening factors of change which is parsimonious; studies that harp on the cognitive, structural and policy-making constraints that hinder change; and cyclical models that push for longitudinal study to identify recurrent behavioral patterns resulting in foreign policy change (Gustavsson, 1999).

Delineating six models that explain foreign policy change – model of foreign policy restructuring (Holsti, 1982); model of stabilizers located in the policy-making system (Goldmann, 1988); model of decision making as the intervening variable (Hermann, 1990); model of diachronic interplay between agency and structure (Carlsnaes, 1993); model of change conditioned by the state's internal and external strength (Skidmore, 1994) and model where periods of stability are succeeded by that of transition (Rosati et al., 1994), Gustavsson (1999) argues that any theoretical endeavor in foreign policy "should focus on the simultaneous occurrence of changes in fundamental structural conditions, strategic political leadership, and the presence of a crisis of some kind." He also provides a thematic organization of these works on the basis of checklist models, structural constraints model and cyclical models.

Moreover, the three dimensions that are conducive to bring about foreign policy change are the degree of institutionalization; the degree of support from within the system; and the degree of salience of the issue in the domestic political sphere (Goldmann, 1988). Gustavsson (1999) contends that the perception of the individual decision maker triggers changes in foreign policy.

Blavoukos and Bourantonis (2017) further enrich the literature by providing an analytical typology of parameters based on both rational choice and cultural approaches to foreign policy making. They cluster the parameters according to their domestic or international origins and structural or conjunctural nature. They regard domestic structural parameters to comprise of the domestic political setting and the existence of advocacy groups in support of alternative foreign policy options. The unit of analysis is the authoritative decision unit that comprises of a powerful leader, like a monarch, dictator, or a predominant political figure in a democratic system; a single group, like the Politburo in the former Soviet Union, a group of

army officers engaged in a military coup, or Cabinet under a Prime Minister; or a multitude of autonomous actors, like coalition governments and actors with veto power over foreign policy decisions. Advocacy groups include supporters of an alternative political culture, socioeconomic groups with divergent views and interests, and policy entrepreneurs in a position to bring about foreign policy change. Domestic upheavals resulting in radical foreign policy shifts in one country also realign foreign policy of third-parties engaged in the former's region.

International structural parameters, on the other hand, include systemic changes that result in foreign policy realignment, and depends on the state's position in and its relationship to the international system. The greater the impact of systemic changes, the more likely they lead to changes in foreign policy. Systemic changes may initiate a reconceptualization of security threats and challenges, a reprioritization of foreign policy objectives, and the emergence of new means of actions and foreign policy options. They are omni-present and cannot be excluded from any analysis. They set the agenda of policy change by altering the environment within which foreign policy evolves and call for a reprioritization of foreign policy objectives.

Conjunctural parameters, whether domestic or international, have a catalytic role, accounting for the unexpected developments that influence the status quo, thereby triggering foreign policy change. These developments include death or succession of a political leader, human disasters and humanitarian crises, international security crises, among others. External security crisis brings to light the irrelevance of past policies in the context of new international developments, subsequently triggering a re-evaluation of existing policies and practices (Welch, 2005; Walsh, 2006).

The existing literature on foreign policy change has primarily been concerned with changes emanating from within the decision-making process. Carlsnaes (1993) along with Hermann (1990) explain change in foreign policy not as a function of the larger systemic transformations, rather as a reorientation of existing governmental policy. Though Goldmann (1988) talks about the systemic factors that may usher in foreign policy change, the fundamental assumption is that policy shifts are the product of changes in ideas within the policy-making system. These changes take three different forms – rethinking by individuals within the system; change in the system composition; and change in the balance of power among the members within the system.

Thus, this literature is inadequate to understand the influence of international conjunctural parameters in analyzing foreign policy change. Furthermore, empirical studies on

such parameters are few and far between. This paper attempts to address these drawbacks by explaining the impact of international conjunctural parameters in changing foreign policy with an empirical study of United States' foreign policy change in the light of the Syrian civil war.

## Transnational Non-state Actors and Foreign Policy Change

This paper argues that international conjunctural parameters primarily trigger foreign policy change in a state. Such parameters are not only issue-specific but can be actor-centric as well. In other words, actors – both state and non-state, can bring about foreign policy change. Since the role of non-state actors (NSA) is largely relegated to a secondary position (Baumann and Stengel, 2014; Hellmann and Jorgensen, 2015; Risse, 2013), research on the impact of NSAs in ushering in change in a state's foreign policy merits attention.

The term 'non-state actors' is used as an umbrella term to refer to private, transnational and international actors. NSAs as autonomous entities in world politics are increasingly gaining importance. They are the 'rival' actors that states need to account for (Chong, 2002) and their role in hybrid forms of policymaking is beyond doubt (Baumann and Stengel, 2014). They are distinguished from state actors on the basis of public/private dichotomy and their sphere of authority. State actors exercise authority within their specific national territory, whereas the authority of NSAs is not limited to a single territory.

This paper concentrates on ISIS as a transnational NSA. It controlled a third of the Syrian territory and 40 percent of Iraq during the peak of its power (Wilson Center, 2019). ISIS successfully extended the breadth of its operations through its network of affiliates by conducting attacks in several states including Egypt, France and United States, among others. Hence, ISIS is a NSA with a transnational footprint.

The literature on globalization examines the role of NSAs in areas such as rule making. However, these studies remain mostly limited to the issue areas, conventionally pertaining to the domestic political sphere, while largely ignoring foreign policy (Aran, 2011). They primarily concentrate on media or domestic interest groups. Looking into journal articles that study NSAs, Baumann and Stengel (2014) delineate a focus on the national context – out of 20 studies, private actors feature in more articles than international (11) and transnational actors (5) combined. To reiterate, despite the broad theoretical and conceptual boundaries of foreign policy analysis, scholars are more focused on the decision-making processes within national governments.

It is arguable that the domestic political context solely shapes foreign policy of a state. In certain situations, conjunctural factors or actors also dictate foreign policy. NSAs

significance in foreign policy is twofold – as autonomous rival actors and their role in a state's foreign policy making, which consists of functions, such as problem representation, agenda setting, decision making, implementation and evaluation (Baumann and Stengel, 2014). Thus, it is imperative to shift the focus of foreign policy analysis on transnational NSAs and their influence on foreign policy change. It will facilitate research on three key areas – a systematic inventory of state/NSAs relationship in foreign policy; factors that influence the participation of NSAs in foreign policy making; and the consequences of the changing politics of foreign policy (Alden and Aran, 2012; Baumann and Stengel, 2014; Risse 2013).

**Foreign Policy Change in Third-party States**

In addition to understanding the increasing importance of transnational NSAs in foreign policy, it is interesting to study the dynamics of foreign policy change in states which are third-parties. This paper conceptualizes states which are external actors in an international security crisis as third-parties. In the context of the Syrian civil war, which is the case study, United States is not a party to the conflict. It acts as an intervenor. The parties to the conflict are the Assad regime and the anti-Assad forces, of which ISIS is a party. United States is external to this conflict because it is neither a regional power either in the Middle East, nor it is a neighbor of Syria. Hence, it is regarded as a third-party.

Third-party states' foreign policy decision to intervene takes three forms – political, military and diplomatic. Political intervention consists of ideological support to one of the warring parties, non-military financial support, access to external markets and communications, use of peacekeeping forces and implementing a blockade. On the other hand, providing funds for military supplies, direct military sales or donations, access to military training, provision of military advisors, rescue missions, engagement in cross-border raids, providing cross-border sanctuaries and sending in-country combat units fall under various ways to intervene militarily (Fox et al., 2009). Diplomatic interventions concern bilateral or multilateral talks or negotiations through ambassadors, envoys at the embassy or consulate levels. This analysis includes all three forms of intervention. Political and diplomatic interventions are characterized as passive and military intervention as active.

In the civil war literature, one question in any study of foreign intervention is the motivation of a state or an organization, be it domestic, regional or international, to intervene. The motivations for third-party intervention are mostly categorized under two heads: instrumental and affective. Instrumental motives refer to material issues like economic gains, military prowess, natural resources and regional stability as well as national security, whereas

affective factors include common identity traits with combatants in the conflict such as common culture, language, religion or ethnic ties and common history.

Since the Cold war, ethnic affinity is regarded as one of the motivating factors for intervention (Fox, 2001; Saideman, 2001). Other factors include internal disruption caused by conflicts, impact of conflicts in international politics, cost-benefit analysis of the intervenors, how threatening are the conflicts to the values of the intervenor (Carment and James, 1996); lack of institutional constraints on part of the intervenor (Carment and James, 1997); proximity of the intervening actor, if the intervenor is a regional, neighboring or international power (Carment and James, 1999); hegemonic ambitions being the cause of intervention, whether the conflict threatens regional stability, sense of international responsibility to continue the regional or world order, humanitarian concerns (Cooper and Berdal, 1993); interest in the parties and issues disputed (Regan, 1996); whether the governments of the conflictual state and intervenor are democracies (Kegley and Hermann, 1997). International factors motivating intervention include international regimes and norms and balancing and bandwagoning. Explanation of intervention from the realist perspectives of balancing and bandwagoning is primarily based on the nature of alliance and whether there is a prior intervention by a rival state in the conflict (Findley and Teo, 2006). According to Van Der Maat (2011), third-party states behave as rational security-maximizing actors in their decision to intervene. Such intervention is more likely in the context of regional instability and territorial transgression.

Sun Tzu, in his seminal book, The Art of War (1963) warns – "he who wishes to fight must count the costs". Given the fact that conflicts are costly and risky, the decision to intervene as a third-party requires significant thought and has a considerable effect on its foreign policy. The various motivations behind intervention, discussed above, demonstrate that the decision to intervene as a third-party in a conflict must be rational. Hence, an interesting puzzle to understand is what triggers change in such a thoughtful and rational foreign policy decision.

This paper argues that a third-party state is likely to change its foreign policy based on international conjunctural parameters. Unexpected international security crisis like regional instability or territorial transgression can lead to foreign policy change. Additionally, the presence or absence of transnational NSAs can bring about change in foreign policy. Such change is manifest in the levels of intensification, refinement, reform and restructuring which correspond to little, minor, moderate and major change in the scope, goal and strategy of foreign policy (Rosati et al., 1994). Thus, an international security crisis along with the presence of a transnational NSA provide the appropriate conditions for a major restructuring in the foreign policy of a third-party state. Given this context, the following are the hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1:* In an international security crisis, foreign policy change in a third-party state depends on the presence or absence of a transnational NSA.

Specifically,

*Hypothesis 1a:* In an international security crisis, the rise and presence of a transnational NSA realign third-party foreign policy towards active intervention.

*Hypothesis 1b:* In an international security crisis, third-party foreign policy is likely to be passive in the absence of a transnational NSA.

The following sections delve into the Syrian civil war. This is a case-study of the conflict from 2011-2019, analyzing the causes behind its emergence, the various dynamics like the rise of ISIS, the impact of the conflict on Syria as well as the Middle East and the realignment of United States' foreign policy as a third-party. The detailed analysis of the conflict will help to understand the role of ISIS as an explanatory variable in triggering a realignment in United States' foreign policy, the outcome variable.

**Syrian Civil War**

In March 2011, Syria's civil war started in the small, remote town of Daara, close to the Jordan border, and in a part of Syria, traditionally known as Jabal al-Druze (Sorensen, 2016). Economic downturn and income inequality were causes behind the popular revolution against the state. Rather than paying attention to the grievances of the local people, Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian President, ordered the army and internal police to start a nationwide campaign against anti-Assad forces, ushering in a civil war. Atrocities under the leadership of Assad intensified, starting with the arrest, torture, and execution of school children in Daraa, followed by indiscriminate shelling of towns and villages; execution of opposition leaders and their suspected sympathizers; slaughter of their families, including rape of their women (Bellin and Krause, 2012). In 2022, a report published by the UN Human Rights Office estimates 306,887 civilian deaths between 1 March 2011 and 31 March 2021 in the Syrian civil war. In 2023, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) reports verified overall casualties at 613,407 since the start of the conflict.

Syria's 'Arab Spring' eventually reverberated in neighboring states, especially in Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. Assad's repression gave rise to refugee and immigration crisis as thousands of Syrians fled to seek refuge in neighboring Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon. "Since March 2011, the conflict has driven more than 4.1 million Syrians into neighboring countries as refugees (out of a total population of more than 22 million). More than 7.5 million other Syrians are internally displaced and are among more than 12 million Syrians in need of

humanitarian assistance." (Blandchard et al., 2015). According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, as of January 2025, more than 6 million people had left Syria in addition to 2.3 million residing in refugee camps. The evolving refugee and immigration crisis, considered as one of the largest and complicated, coupled with mass casualties and expansion of the scope and breadth of the conflict points to an international security crisis. In particular, it threatens the regional stability of the Middle East and created the fertile ground for another third-party intervention in the region.

### ISIS as a Transnational Non-state Actor in the Syrian Civil War

One of the determining factors for the scope and intensity of the Syrian civil war was the rise of ISIS and its unique functioning as a transnational non-state terrorist group. The roots of ISIS can be traced to al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), founded by Abu Masab al-Zarqawi. With the death of Zarqawi in 2006, Abu Ayub al-Masri emerged as the new leader with the vision to create an Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). In Iraq, militants from Syria joined the disaffected Iraqi Baath party, the military, and the dissatisfied Iraqi Sunni population to form the Islamic State (IS), a 'caliphate' proclaimed by Abu-Bakr Al-Baghdadi. Baghdadi came to power following the killing of al-Masri. He renamed IS as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) (Freemen, 2015). With the self-designation of Baghdadi as the caliph of the self-proclaimed Islamic State on June 29, 2014, with its capital in al-Raqqa, ISIS is said to be born.

In the words of Walt (2015), ISIS is 'uniquely baffling and unusually dangerous'. ISIS regards the outside world as hostile and heretical which triggers the need to establish an Islamic caliphate. Prior to ISIS, no Muslim-majority state declared itself as an 'Islamic State' (Sorensen, 2016). It specifically declared Sunni Islam as its fundamental identity. Christians and Jews were relegated to a 'protected' (dhimmi) status by repressing them to pay a special tax. Other sects like the Yazidi in Iraq were declared apostates and savagely murdered or sold into slavery (Mintz and Wayne, 2016; Sorensen, 2016).

ISIS surprised the world in two ways – through its formation and its early success. It successfully took advantage of surprise and shock to defeat and intimidate its victims into surrender. It was also aware of the fact that given its objectives, it needs to adopt innovative strategies to establish territory for the control of resources (Sorensen, 2016). In May and June 2015, ISIS conducted operations in central and northern Syria, against both pro- and anti-Assad forces. It controlled most of the Euphrates River valley and some areas adjacent to Syria's borders with Turkey and Iraq (Blandchard et al., 2015).

ISIS also successfully established its stronghold by seizing assets like Syria's largest oil field, al-Omar and Shaer gas field in 2014, incurring a civilian casualty of more than 270. By July 2014, ISIS possessed more than 60 percent of Syria's oil capacity and pumped over 180,000 barrels of oil per day from the oil fields (Mintz and Wayne, 2016; Sorensen, 2016).

The immense attraction of foreign fighters in this terrorist organization is concerning to the peace and stability of not only the Middle East but also the international political theatre. By September 2014, the CIA reported that ISIS comprised of 20,000 and 30,000 members in Syria and Iraq respectively, with most adherents from the Middle East, Europe, Asia, and North America (Sorensen, 2016). The swift rise of ISIS, its unique ideology along with its strategy and success speak of its indispensable importance as a transnational NSA in the Syrian civil war.

## United States' Intervention

United States' intervention in this conflict is analyzed in two phases – prior to the advent of ISIS (2011-2013) and post-ISIS emergence (2014-2019). Differentiating the intervention in these two phases is particularly beneficial to understand the shift in United States' foreign policy – passive and active intervention in the pre- and post-ISIS periods, respectively.

## Pre-ISIS Foreign Policy (2011-2013)

Initially, United States' response to the mounting violence in Syria was largely rhetorical. Its intervention was based on an already well-established doctrinal approach to security in the Middle East – "if vital US national interests are not directly concerned, the mobilization of partners and allies allows for the sharing of the strategic and operational burden of war" (Krieg, 2016).

Till 2015, United States was the largest bilateral provider of humanitarian assistance, with more than $4.5 billion. It allocated more than $440 million for non-lethal assistance to select opposition groups. President Obama requested $385 million in FY2015 and FY2016 Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) funding for such assistance. FY2015 Appropriations Act addressed the needs of civilians affected by conflict with the objectives to — "establish governance in Syria that is representative, inclusive, and accountable; expand the role of women in negotiations to end the violence and in any political transition in Syria; develop and implement political processes that are democratic, transparent, and adhere to the rule of law; further the legitimacy of the Syrian opposition through cross-border programs; develop civil

society and an independent media in Syria; promote economic development in Syria; document, investigate, and prosecute human rights violations in Syria, including through transitional justice programs and support for nongovernmental organizations; counter extremist ideologies; and assist Syrian refugees whose education has been interrupted by the ongoing conflict to complete higher education requirements at regional academic institutions" (Blandchard et al., 2015). Moreover, the intervention came with the assertion by administration officials that no military solution to the conflict was feasible.

This kind of intervention is regarded as 'surrogate warfare' (Krieg, 2016). It is primarily a response to a perceived misfit between urgency and the costs of military intervention. In this phase of the Syrian civil war, United States' foreign policy was primarily focused on providing humanitarian assistance and to some extent, diplomatic support. Hence, this paper argues that United States maintained a passive intervention strategy. The gradual escalation of the civil war did not prompt a review of its foreign policy until after the advent of ISIS in 2014.

**Post-ISIS Foreign Policy (2014-2019)**

By 2015, President Obama started realigning his foreign policy on the belief that ISIS was a graver threat than the civil war, per se. On September 28, 2014, in an interview on 60 Minutes, he stated that "intelligence agencies had underestimated the peril posed by the Islamic State," quoting James R. Clapper, Jr., the Director of National Intelligence, and claiming that analysts "did not foresee the stunning success of Islamic State forces…" (Baker and Schmitt, 2014). ISIL has evolved from being a "terrorist group on-the-ropes to a full-blown army" in the words of United States' Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, Brett McGurk (Knights, 2014).

Obama announced the creation of an Arab force, with a strength of 3,000-5,000, armed with United States sponsored weapons to join over 20,000 Kurdish forces to attack ISIS' capital, al-Raqqa (Sorensen, 2016). The goal of this strategy was to counter and ultimately destroy ISIS through a US-led international coalition using military air power to attack ISIS strongholds.

United States carried out air strikes against ISIS on August 8, 2014, with the aim to prevent potential genocide of the Christian and Yazidi populations. The formal announcement of the strikes was made on September 10, 2014 (Mintz and Wayne, 2016). The success of the strikes was not uniform – while some territories were freed from ISIS' stronghold, ISIS advanced to other areas to establish their authority (Blandchard et al., 2015). As a response to the strikes, ISIS publicly executed two United States' journalists, James Foley and Steven

Sotloff who were captured while covering the conflict. As of March 2019, United States' military intervention was somewhat able to free Syria of ISIS strongholds.

This led President Donald Trump to declare on December 19, 2018, withdrawal of the 2,000 American troops from Syria. This announcement provoked an immediate backlash from both Democrats and Republicans in United States' Congress followed by resignation of its Defense Secretary, Jim Mattis (The Washington Post, January 2019). On March 23, 2019, President Trump announced "American and coalition forces have had one military victory after another over the last two years against ISIS, including the retaking of both Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria. We've liberated more than 20,000 square miles of territory." (The White House, March 2019).

Therefore, it can be argued that changes in battlefield dynamics over time, particularly the rise and success of ISIS, ushered in shifts in United States' foreign policy and rhetoric about the conflict. Although United States initially placed emphasis on humanitarian assistance and a negotiated settlement as the primary objective of its foreign policy in Syria, with the rise of ISIS, the Obama administration slowly embraced active military intervention in the civil war.

## ISIS and United States' Foreign Policy Change

From the preceding discussion, it is evident that a 'major' restructuring of the scope, goal and strategy in United States' foreign policy happened in the context of the Syrian civil war. In terms of the four graduated levels of foreign policy change – adjustment change (change in the levels of effort and in the scope of the recipients); program change (change in the method and means through which the problem is addressed); problem/goal changes (realignment of the purposes altogether) and finally, international orientation change (change in the actor's entire orientation towards international politics) (Hermann, 1990), it is argued that United States made adjustment change, program change and problem/goal change.

United States' intervention in the Syrian civil war started on a hesitant note. In the words of Clinton, the then United States' Secretary of State, "Do nothing and a humanitarian disaster envelops the region. Intervene militarily and risk opening a Pandora's Box and wading into another quagmire, like Iraq." (Clinton, 2014). United States was torn between two potential courses of action – whether to restrict itself by providing arms and training to the Syrian rebels or to completely stay out of the conflict and use economic sanctions as a strategy to pressurize the Assad regime. The former stand reflects an active intervention strategy and the latter, a passive intervention.

Within a period of three years since the start of the civil war in 2011, American foreign policy interest reoriented towards combating ISIS through an active military intervention. President Obama ordered a review of United States' foreign policy on ISIS and Syria in mid-November 2014. Specifically, the Obama administration reiterated that any effort to defeat ISIS in Syria must be complemented by an effort to bring an end to the broader Syrian conflict that includes a transition away from Bashar al Assad's rule (Blandchard et al., 2015).

The decision to realign United States' foreign policy in response to the rise and presence of ISIS was not without criticism. There was agreement to degrade and destroy ISIS but extensive disagreement on how to achieve this objective tactically (Mintz and Wayne, 2016). There was an absence of a clear tactical vision – "On the one hand, Obama really did have long term ambitions to destroy ISIS . . . On the other hand, he recognized that this is impossible in the near term, and that the best the U.S. could do was lay the groundwork for ISIS' eventual collapse" (Beauchamp, 2014). Moreover, while the Syrian opposition forces fighting ISIS supported United States and the coalition's assistance in their campaign, they questioned United States' foreign policy stance – being passive against the Assad regime and not protect innocent Syrian civilians from being repressed by their own governmental forces but actively engaged to counter ISIS influence (Blandchard et al., 2015).

As argued, this shift in United States' foreign policy of intervention – from passive to active, aligns with the advent of ISIS as a transnational NSA and represents a major foreign policy change. With ISIS pulling the strings in the Syrian battlefield, the focus of United States' foreign policy shifted completely from the civil war, per se to combating terrorism perpetrated by ISIS. Hence, domestic political context does not solely shape foreign policy of a state. In an international security crisis, international factors or actors are the ones that dictate foreign policy. In other words, international conjunctural parameters – in this context, the Syrian civil war and the rise of ISIS brought about a major change in United States' foreign policy as a third-party in the conflict.

**Conclusion**

There is scope for further research on this empirical case study. United States' initial troop withdrawal from Syria in 2019 cleared the way for other third-party states' active military intervention. This paper has not discussed the role of Turkey and Russia in the conflict. Both states have contributed to shaping the trajectory of the conflict. Hence, it is worth analyzing whether foreign policy change in a third-party state is also influenced by the presence or absence of another third-party state in the same conflict.

With the military coup against the Assad regime in December, 2024 and the establishment of the al-Sharaa government in March, 2025, it remains to be seen whether ISIS will once again gain a strong foothold in the area and if that happens, what the United States' response will be. On December 13, 2025, three US soldiers and a US civilian interpreter were killed by ISIS. President Trump has vowed to retaliate. (The New York Times, December 2025)

Finally, the literature on foreign policy change takes into consideration a state's interactions with other states and international organizations by means of foreign policy adjustment, conditionality policies and socialization processes. It is argued that states tend to shape their policies in accordance with other states, as a prerequisite for membership in international organizations, for alliance formation with other states or to integrate themselves with the international system. According to Blavoukos and Bourantonis (2017), the level of institutional embeddedness in an international organization along with the depth and scope of interaction are important determinants that subsequently result in foreign policy shift. Therefore, research on whether there is a realignment of foreign policy in the context of alliance formation, either bilateral or multilateral, will be an interesting endeavor.

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