

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The wild card: Syria's war in the age of Trump

The only reason President Obama wants to attack Syria is to save face over his very dumb RED LINE statement. Do NOT attack Syria, fix U.S.A.

Tweet by Donald Trump, 5 September 2013,
after alleged regime chemical weapons attack in East Ghouta¹

These heinous actions by the Bashar al-Assad regime are a consequence of the past administration's weakness and irresolution. President Obama said in 2012 that he would establish a 'red line' against the use of chemical weapons and then did nothing.

Official statement by Donald Trump, 4 April 2017,
shortly before launching a missile strike on Assad after
alleged regime chemical weapons attack in Khan Sheikhoun, Idlib²

On a wet day in January 2017, the newly elected President of the United States took to the podium in front of the Capitol Building in Washington, DC and delivered his inaugural address. In his trademark red tie and coiffured blond hair, Donald J. Trump, a property mogul and reality TV star with no political experience, delivered a bleak assessment of America's place in the world. 'For many decades, we've enriched foreign industry at the expense of American industry . . . The wealth of our middle class has been ripped from their homes and then redistributed across the entire world.' He therefore promised that, 'From this moment on, it's going to be America First . . . America will start winning again, winning like never before . . . We will seek friendship and goodwill with the nations of the world – but we do so with the understanding that it is the right of all nations to put their own interests first.'

While Trump's supporters lining the Mall replied with rapturous applause, Washington's establishment figures, including members of his own Republican Party, looked on nervously. Trump was not expected to

win either the Republican nomination or the presidential election against former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. He was an outsider, prone to bellicose language, political incorrectness and U-turns, and had promised highly provocative foreign policies during his campaign, including building a wall along the Mexican border and banning all Muslims from entering the US. Historically, transitions from president to president have seen a degree of continuity in US foreign policy, but Trump's inauguration suggested a radical departure. By using the slogan 'America First', which echoed 1930s isolationists, and promising protectionist economic policies, Trump appeared to be rejecting the entire post-1945 global order and America's leading role. While many hoped that the forty-fifth president's more radical instincts might be moderated in office, it was already clear that Trump would attempt to lead the US in an international direction very different from that of Obama.

This chapter will consider the impact of the new president on the Syria conflict. It will first outline the state of the war on the eve of Trump's inauguration: the failure of Obama to halt Putin in western Syria balanced against advances over ISIS in the east. It will note how the US was increasingly marginalised in western Syria, with Russia, Iran and Turkey emerging as the leading international players, culminating in the Astana peace process after eastern Aleppo fell in late 2016. Within this context the entry of Trump will be assessed, considering whether his approach actually represented a departure. It will be suggested that although his bombastic style might have been distinctive, the end result during his first years in office was little different from Obama's: marginalisation in western Syria alongside further entrenchment in the post-ISIS east.

Obama's twilight

In western Syria – the areas controlled primarily by the Assad regime and the rebels – Obama's final year in office was a story of failure and decreasing influence. While 2016 began with the US and Russia negotiating to end the conflict, by the year's end Moscow appeared to have outmanoeuvred Washington diplomatically and militarily.

American diplomacy proved unable to prevent the collapse of the February 2016 cessation of hostilities, the failure of the Geneva III talks and the undermining of the Vienna Process. The cessation of hostilities did see a notable decline in fatalities, with a 35 per cent drop across Syria in the first three months.³ Yet arguably it contained the seeds of its own demise, being only a partial ceasefire that allowed the US, Russia and the regime to

continue the fight in territories controlled by ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra. With Russia and Assad long claiming that all rebel-held territory included a jihadist presence, it didn't prove difficult for them to gradually increase their violations of the cessation. One such strike torpedoed the Geneva III talks. On 19 April regime bombers killed thirty-seven civilians in a market place in Maarat al-Nu'man. The outraged opposition HNC, which had complained more than 2,000 times since February that the regime was violating the ceasefire, walked out of Geneva in protest. Sergei Lavrov responded that he saw 'players on the outside' trying to derail the process.⁴ With no talks to even pay lip service to, violations continued and the cessation broke down by May. Obama's critics argued that the whole process had been a Russian ploy to regroup.⁵

As Assad's military campaign resumed and the humanitarian situation worsened, it made Obama look even more impotent. While international law forbids targeting hospitals, between May and November regime and Russian bombers seemed to deliberately target hospitals in rebel areas, particularly eastern Aleppo. According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights, eighty medical facilities in Syria were attacked in 2016 with eighty-one medical workers killed. Assad was also accused of deliberately besieging and starving outlying rebel pockets. In one incident in June, regime forces reportedly bombed besieged Darayya immediately after a long-awaited UN food delivery was allowed in. Washington repeatedly tried to halt the carnage, but failed. It attempted once more to revive the ceasefire in September, but this collapsed within a week, not least because a US strike intended for ISIS instead struck a regime position, killing sixty-two soldiers. Western allies then twice attempted UN Security Council resolutions: a Franco-Spanish call to end the bombing of eastern Aleppo in October which Russia vetoed, and a Spanish-Egyptian-New Zealand-led appeal for a truce in the city in early December, which was similarly blocked by Russia, this time alongside China.

As Americans went to vote in November, Assad looked increasingly imperious in western Syria. Rebel-held suburbs in Damascus, Darayya and Muadamiyat agreed to evacuate to far-off Idlib in late summer. By late autumn Assad had surrounded eastern Aleppo, and its conquest appeared imminent. Obama himself said on 11 November that he was 'not optimistic about the short-term prospects in Syria', arguing that Russia and Iran's decision to back Assad in a brutal air campaign had ultimately tipped the scales.⁶

In contrast, developments in eastern Syria were more promising. Western airstrikes alongside support for SDF forces on the ground had forced ISIS to

retreat. In May 2016 the SDF announced the start of a campaign to capture Raqqa, ISIS' effective capital. However, in a sign that Washington's Kurdish-dominated ally was far from a complicit proxy force, the troops for this assault were soon diverted north-west to instead capture the city of Manbij from the Caliphate. Likewise, the SDF seized Tal Rifaat near Afrin from the rebels in February, taking advantage of a Russia-Assad attack and illustrating their independent streak. The conquests of Manbij and Tal Rifaat severely irked Turkey, and would soon have greater ramifications. However, territorial gains did further squeeze out ISIS and, alongside victories for the Iraqi army in Fallujah in June and Ramadi in December, and the beginning of the siege of Mosul in October, meant that this was one area in which the administration could boast of some success.

On balance, however, the final year of Obama's presidency saw the Syrian situation worsen. While the campaign against ISIS may have turned in his favour, this was overshadowed by his perceived impotence in the face of Assad and Russia's advances and the humanitarian crises that came with them. Domestic critics labelled Syria 'Obama's shame', while both presidential candidates, even his former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, were critical in different ways.⁷ For many, it wasn't just that Obama had proved unable to prevent the worsening crisis, it was that he had been repeatedly outfoxed by the Kremlin.

Putin ascendant

The string of military and diplomatic successes for Putin in 2016 and Obama's inability to prevent them gave the impression that Moscow was eclipsing Washington in Syria. Of course, as has been discussed previously, the United States' influence on the conflict was always more limited than perceived, but this narrative, seized on by Obama's domestic and international critics, was also championed by Putin's supporters. Three developments in particular boosted this view: Russia's rapprochement with Turkey, Assad's recapture of eastern Aleppo and the subsequent Moscow-led peace process in Astana.

Turkey invades

On 24 August 2016, a small column of Turkish tanks supported by FSA militia rolled into the ISIS-held northern border town of Jarablus, making Turkey the first anti-Assad state to occupy Syrian territory. However, this was not the beginning of a sizeable invasion aimed at regime change, but rather a limited campaign targeting the PYD and ISIS, not Assad. It represented a

significant shift in Ankara's priorities, and had come after a volte-face towards Russia and significant internal changes in Turkey.

By early 2016, the Syria war was looking grim for Turkey. The PKK and ISIS had both launched multiple terror attacks, which Ankara said had links to Syria, while Turkey's rebel allies were getting nowhere in their attempts to topple Assad. The diplomatic fallout had left Turkey isolated, sanctioned by Russia on the one hand and increasingly distant from Washington on the other. Erdoğan therefore took dramatic measures. On 5 May it was announced that Davutoğlu would be resigning as prime minister. Despite having been firm allies for over a decade, Davutoğlu was reportedly unconvinced both by Erdoğan's plans for a new executive presidency and the excessive military force now being deployed against the PKK. Yet Davutoğlu had no independent support as a politician, meaning that, after losing Erdoğan's backing, his departure was inevitable.

After appointing a new premier, the more compliant Binali Yıldırım, Erdoğan took the opportunity to reset Turkey's international position. The president's supporters were soon claiming that Ankara's foreign policy blunders such as the Syria debacle were down to Davutoğlu, glossing over Erdoğan's leading role. Diplomatic shifts followed. Officials privately briefed that regime change in Syria was no longer a priority.⁸ A reconciliation agreement with Israel restoring diplomatic ties was announced on 26 June, with Israel apologising for the Mavi Marmara incident and Turkey quietly dropping its demand to fully lift the Gaza siege. Most significantly, at the end of June Erdoğan apologised to Russia for downing the Su-24 jet. This opened the way for a more general rapprochement, ultimately prompting Moscow to lift its sanctions and resume Russian tourism.

Against this backdrop, Turkey was rocked by an attempted coup d'état by sections of the military in July. Despite attempts to seize strategic places, loyal military units and public demonstrators defeated the plotters. Over 300 people were killed in the attempt and several thousand injured. In a rare moment of unity, Turks from all political backgrounds – including the opposition CHP – came together in Istanbul's Yenikapı Square to greet Erdoğan and show their support for Turkey's democracy. However, the president responded with a harsh crackdown that ultimately resembled a 'self coup', using the incident to bolster his own power. Some opponents even claimed that he had orchestrated the whole attempt as a pretext.⁹

Erdoğan pinned the blame on the Gülen movement, although Fethullah Gülen strongly denied this from his exile in the US. On 20 July the government declared a state of emergency, subsequently renewed every three months by parliament. This authorised a wave of arrests and oppression.

Even before the coup attempt, the government had cracked down on free speech, arresting hundreds of journalists and forcing the closure of several publications. Now, key public institutions were purged, with universities, the civil service, the judiciary, schools and the military all targeted. By mid-2017, 50,000 people had been arrested, including more than 10,000 soldiers, while 15,000 education staff had lost their jobs.¹⁰ The crackdown was welcomed by Erdoğan's new domestic ally, the ultra-nationalist MHP, which in December supported the president's long-held ambition of constitutional reform by backing in parliament a plebiscite on adopting a presidential system. The vote was held in April 2017 and was narrowly won by the 'Yes' camp, with 51.4 per cent. Arguably Erdoğan now had more power than any Turkish leader since Atatürk.

With the post-purge military now dominated by loyalists, Erdoğan was able to pursue a more hawkish Syria policy. Operation Euphrates Shield was launched on 24 August with the declared goal of clearing ISIS and the PYD from Turkey's border to decrease terror attacks in Turkey and to prevent the development of a contiguous Kurdish proto-state led by the PYD. The invasion was prompted by the SDF's capture of Manbij. Alongside the PYD's capture of Tal Rifaat, this raised fears that it may soon be able to link up the Kobane and Afrin cantons. Turkey had evidently been planning an operation for months, as it had transported FSA fighters from Idlib and Syrian Turkmen militia through Turkey for the assault. The initial goal appeared to be to push ISIS out of Jarablus and nearby al-Bab, linking these areas up to a rebel pocket in Azaz and thus carving out a Turkish buffer zone. The rapprochement with Russia was absolutely key. Moscow, effectively in control of western Syrian airspace, took no action against the Turkish-rebel forces, blessing the invasion. There were also reports of significant intelligence-sharing between Russia and Turkey.¹¹ Moreover, while the Assad regime decried this 'blatant violation' of Syria's sovereignty, its forces did not strike Turkish troops, suggesting a degree of acceptance, most likely at Russia's behest.¹²

The operation, however, had mixed results. Ostensibly, Turkey achieved its initial goals. It swiftly captured Jarablus in August 2016, taking the symbolic village of Dabiq – after which ISIS had named its propaganda magazine – in October and al-Bab in February 2017. However, the operation took far longer than expected and at least sixty-seven Turkish troops were killed.¹³ Further expansion of the buffer zone was soon prevented when regime troops conquered ISIS positions south of al-Bab, leaving Turkey and its rebel allies blocked in by Assad to the south and the PYD to the east and west. Further conquest would require attacking the allies of either Russia or the US. Given Russia's importance to the operation, attacking Assad was never an option, but

with US ties strained, and even more so after Washington refused to extradite Gülen, assaults on the PYD did take place. Manbij, Afrin and their vicinities were repeatedly shelled, prompting the US to send special forces into the former in February 2017 to deter Ankara. Similarly, the next month the SDF announced that Manbij's western villages, between the town and Turkish troops, would be ceded to regime control to act as a protective buffer zone.

Outmanoeuvred, Erdoğan and Yıldırım announced the 'end' of Euphrates Shield in late March 2017. However, there was no intention of withdrawing troops, and plans were already being considered for a future assault on Afrin – the one PYD stronghold without a significant US presence. Russia's withdrawal of a small military contingent from the city in June suggested Moscow might endorse this. However, Turkey would have to navigate the costs of militarily occupying a hostile Kurdish stronghold, alongside questions over how sustainable its presence in the Jarablus–Azaz–al-Bab triangle was. As Israel discovered in south Lebanon in the 1980s and 1990s, open-ended occupations in hostile territory can prove bloody and expensive.

The fall of eastern Aleppo

The Turkey–Russia rapprochement contributed to another major victory for Putin: Assad's reconquest of rebel-held eastern Aleppo in December 2016. Reports in the Lebanese press suggested that, in exchange for permitting Turkish forces to enter the north, Erdoğan promised Putin that he would stop backing the eastern Aleppo rebels.¹⁴ Moreover, with Euphrates Shield recruiting a contingent of Idlib rebels, this weakened the forces sent to relieve the siege of Aleppo. More significant was the sizeable increase in military support provided by Russia and Iran. In October, Moscow deployed its only aircraft carrier, the *Admiral Kuznetsov*, to the eastern Mediterranean. This added yet more airpower for the assault on Aleppo and served as a show of force to Western powers to deter any last-minute talk of intervening to save the rebel enclave.¹⁵ Russia also bolstered its special forces and military advisers on the ground. Iran, meanwhile, increased the number of Quds Force, Hezbollah, Iraqi, Afghani and Pakistani Shia militia in Syria. Some estimated that Assad's final assault on eastern Aleppo involved more foreign Shia militiamen than Syrian army troops, with Hezbollah and Iraqi Shia leading the assaults and the Syrian army playing a supportive role.¹⁶ That said, the Tiger Forces, an elite Syrian army special forces unit led by Suheil al-Hassan, took the lead at several key points.

The capture of eastern Aleppo came after months of gradual military advances. Alongside the brutal 'softening up' of rebel positions by targeting medical infrastructure, in July the Tiger Forces captured the strategically

important Castello Road, encircling the east. In an attempt to break the siege, rebel forces – including the Jaysh al-Fateh from Idlib – launched a counter-attack. Huge piles of tyres were burnt to obscure the view of Russian and regime bombers, while multiple assaults led to a rebel breakout in the south-west in August. However, this success was short-lived, and by early September regime forces had recaptured lost ground. Several further rebel breakouts also failed, setting the stage for Assad's advance.

In late September, Russian and regime jets pounded eastern Aleppo in the harshest attacks yet. In one day over 150 airstrikes were reported, killing at least 90 people, mostly civilians.¹⁷ In the following ground assault the regime captured the Handarat Palestinian refugee camp in the city's north and took 15 per cent of rebel territory. After a brief pause to repel another failed rebel counter-offensive, the final assault began on 15 November. After more airstrikes, in nine days regime forces captured the Hanano district, representing about a quarter of remaining rebel territory in the city and, symbolically, the first area the rebels captured in 2012. Rebel forces swiftly collapsed, with some reports suggesting that the lack of medical facilities and intense Russian bombardment had proven decisive.¹⁸ Assad's forces continued their advance, recapturing the old city and the symbolic but badly damaged eighth-century Umayyad Mosque on 6 December. In the days that followed, the regime and Russia paused their assault, ostensibly to allow for the evacuation of up to 8,000 civilians, although people noted that troops were redeployed to Palmyra where ISIS had used the regime's distraction to successfully recapture the desert city. This setback did not ultimately change the picture in Aleppo. The remaining rebels, pushed into a tiny pocket in the south, eventually agreed to withdraw completely as part of a Russia–Turkey mediated ceasefire on 13 December.

A degree of confusion and recrimination followed. Under the terms of the ceasefire, rebel fighters and civilians were to be evacuated, but for days buses intended for the task sat motionless as negotiations continued. Eventually the evacuation commenced, in fits and starts, leading to more than 40,000 departing. Figures vary, but the International Red Cross claimed that 4,000 of these were fighters who, along with their families (around 10,000), were escorted to Idlib province. The remaining civilians stayed in western Aleppo.¹⁹ The rebels and their Syrian and international supporters had long argued that Assad's conquest of the east would lead to massacres and unparalleled civilian slaughter. The SOHR reported that over 465 civilians were killed during the fighting, mostly by airstrikes, and 149 more in western Aleppo by rebel shelling.²⁰ The UN further stated it had credible evidence that Iraqi Shia militia had been responsible for the

summary killing of up to eighty-two civilians in the final battle.²¹ Brutal though these killings were, they were fewer than many had feared.

On 22 December the Syrian army announced it was in full control of the city for the first time since summer 2012, although the PYD retained its Kurdish enclave of Sheikh Maqsood. West Aleppans crossed into the east to inspect the ruins of the once stunning old city, relieved that the war was finally receding from view. East Aleppans also trickled back to rebuild their destroyed neighbourhoods, some having fled only as the battle raged, others having departed in 2012. In public, those interviewed from both sides of the city praised Assad as a liberator, though some privately noted their continued fear of the regime and its new foreign Shia militia allies.²² For the rebels, the defeat was a catastrophe. While the tide had been turning against them for years, losing their foothold in Syria's second city reduced any substantial presence to peripheral Idlib and Deraa. This diminished any claim to represent large parts of Syria and hampered their representatives' bargaining power. It may have been obvious for some time that the rebels couldn't win the war, but after Aleppo fell it looked increasingly likely they were going to lose. For Assad, in contrast, the capture was a triumph. After first regaining Homs in 2014, he now had control of all of Syria's major cities. With Russian and Iranian help 'Rump Syria' was now expanding and, while recapturing the entire east still looked daunting, eliminating the rebels in the west appeared viable for the first time. For Putin, breaking the deadlock was a major breakthrough, especially given it was his diplomatic and military moves that had facilitated the victory. He could now leverage the outcome into a new peace process that excluded the US.

Pax Russica?

The Astana peace process would not have been possible without the summer rapprochement between Turkey and Russia, and it was these states that took the lead. Building on the Aleppo ceasefire they brokered on 13 December, Putin and Erdoğan agreed that a new round of Syria talks should take place in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, a Russian ally. Iran endorsed this and, alongside Russia and Turkey, invoked UN Resolution 2254, passed at the beginning of the Vienna Process in 2015, as the legal justification for the new talks. True to the Vienna Process, ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra and the PYD-aligned Syrian Democratic Council were not invited to attend, but this time Western states, including the US, were also absent. After the evacuation of Aleppo was completed, Turkey and Russia brokered a nationwide ceasefire that came into effect on 30 December. While areas controlled by ISIS and Nusra were again excluded, through Turkish pressure key rebel

groups including Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam signed up, although they soon complained of regime violations.²³ This signified a change in how such agreements would operate and it was the fighting groups, not their political representatives like the SOC and HNC, that were invited to the first round of talks in January, although Ahrar refused to attend despite signing up to the ceasefire. Russia claimed this would prove more successful than previous talks since it involved those actually fighting, yet the shift to Astana was as much about Moscow presenting itself as the new power broker at Washington's expense.²⁴ Even so, the process and the ceasefire received the unanimous endorsement of the UN Security Council on 31 December.

Far from being a breakthrough, however, the process appeared, in the words of The Century Foundation's Sam Heller, 'more like a forum for its three state sponsors [Russia, Iran and Turkey] to broker deals amongst themselves frequently at the Syrian opposition's expense.'²⁵ An indication of this was seen at the first gathering in January 2017, when Russia presented the opposition representatives – led by Jaysh al-Islam's Mohammad Alloush – with a new Syrian constitution. The document appeared to have involved no consultation with Syrian representatives or the wider public. It was swiftly rejected by Alloush and then quietly cast aside, but it illustrated Moscow's top-down approach. This was seen repeatedly. At the third meeting in May Russia and Turkey announced a plan to strengthen the ceasefire with the creation of 'safe zones'. Russia, Turkey and Iran would act as external guarantors over four 'de-escalation' zones in western Syria, all rebel strongholds: Idlib; Rastan near Homs; East Ghouta in Damascus; and the Badia region around Deraa and the Jordanian border. The zones would effectively freeze the conflict, with regime forces forbidden from bombing or shelling them, rebels forbidden from launching attacks, and humanitarian aid allowed to pass inside. While the United States, now led by a Trump administration more open to Moscow, cautiously welcomed the idea after sending US observers to Astana for the first time, the opposition delegation was furious. Outraged that Iran, who it saw as hand in glove with Assad, was proposed as one of the guarantors, the delegation stormed out. However, in a sign of its ever-shrinking influence, the opposition, led again by Alloush, was back in Astana for the next round of talks in July.

The Astana process overshadowed the UN's efforts to broker peace, but Staffan de Mistura persisted nevertheless. The Geneva IV Process, as it was dubbed, began in February 2017 with the same indirect approach as the failed Geneva III talks. However, unlike previous efforts, these did not break down prematurely. Instead, further rounds were held in May and July. While these talks involved largely the same Syrian government delegations as

attended Astana, with UN envoy Bashar al-Jaafari leading both, the opposition was still represented by the HNC rather than the armed factions. These talks avoided the acrimony of previous rounds, partly because they stuck to technical topics while avoiding the sensitive matter of Assad's future, but also because both sides knew that Astana was where the real decisions were being made.

Trump and Syria

The Donald

Into this Russian-dominated scene stepped Donald Trump, arguably the most overtly pro-Russia US president in modern history. Trump was quite unlike past presidents. He was the first to have held no prior military or government position, and was simultaneously the oldest and wealthiest ever to enter the Oval Office. He was more outspoken than his predecessors, prone to speaking, and frequently tweeting, off-script, without sticking to a recognisable line or set of policies. This combination of inexperience and indiscipline made it difficult to ascertain a clear foreign policy or 'Trump Doctrine' for the new administration. Even so, the various observers of his first years in office broadly fell into three schools of thought.

The first group anticipated a radical departure in US foreign policy. Trump's promise to put 'America First' suggested a reversion to isolationism, abdicating the US' global leadership and retreating into protectionist economics and populist nationalism.²⁶ The appointment of Steve Bannon, a founder of the right-wing Breitbart News website that once described itself as the platform of the alt-right, seemed to support this idea. Bannon, who opposed both free trade and US involvement in the Middle East, was made White House Chief Strategist and a member of the Principals Committee of the National Security Council.²⁷ The president's early statements and policies reinforced these views. Trump had questioned NATO's value, declaring it 'obsolete' on the campaign trail. Within a week of assuming office, he signed an executive order that forbade citizens of seven predominantly Muslim countries (including Syria) from entering the US, although this was ultimately delayed and amended by the courts. He would later initiate a damaging trade war with China and withdraw from Obama's landmark international deals: the Paris climate accords, the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement and, after a few years' deliberation, the JCPOA.

However, despite these opening controversies, a second group of observers questioned how revolutionary the administration really was.

They saw Trump as co-opted by the Washington and Republican establishment, ultimately following a traditional US foreign policy with a few outlandish statements along the way.²⁸ They noted that Trump rolled back his criticism of NATO within months, while he was no less involved in the Middle East than Obama: stepping up the campaign against ISIS; engaging, somewhat forlornly, with the Israel-Palestine peace process; and reversing his previous opposition to maintaining troops in Afghanistan. Bannon and his nationalist allies were far from unchallenged and key administration positions were held by more establishment figures, mischievously labelled by some 'the adults in the room'.²⁹ These included James Mattis as Secretary of Defense, Rex Tillerson as Secretary of State, and H.R. McMaster as National Security Advisor after the first choice, Michael T. Flynn, was abruptly dismissed in February. As Elliott Abrams argued, 'Trump's national security team embodies "the Establishment" as much as John F. Kennedy's or Dwight Eisenhower's did'.³⁰ Such voices saw continuity in Trump's foreign policy. He was more aggressive with Iran than Obama but, as Gregory Gause noted, confrontation with Tehran was the US norm since 1979 with Obama being the anomaly.³¹ This interpretation suggested Trump's more radical instincts could be moderated over time and contained by establishment figures and the structural conditions of global politics, resulting in a more conformist foreign policy than many expected. Steve Bannon's departure from the White House in August 2017 suggested this might be the direction of travel.

However, a third perspective saw less logic and more chaos. Stephen Walt describes the forty-fifth president as an 'amateur' who is 'inexperienced, impulsive, and inept'.³² Even if he was co-opted by the foreign policy establishment hoping to steer the White House towards more active global involvement, his basic incompetence and unpredictability made achieving this an impossibility. Tillerson's State Department was chronically understaffed, with key positions unfilled and huge budget cuts, meaning foreign policy expertise was under utilised. Commentators noted how Trump was easily swayed by individuals, not only advisers like Bannon and his son-in-law Jared Kushner, but also by foreign leaders such as Benjamin Netanyahu and Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. In some cases, this has led to contradictory policy. After meeting the prince in Riyadh, Trump was persuaded to publicly support a Saudi-UAE embargo of neighbouring Qatar, supposedly because of its links to funding terror. Yet this was challenged by Rex Tillerson's State Department, perhaps more aware than Trump of Qatar's strategic importance and its being home to over 11,000 US servicemen, and which stated it was

'mystified' by Saudi Arabia's actions.³³ Those subscribing to this third approach saw such confusion as inevitable given Trump's unwillingness to conform to long-term strategies and discipline. Still more of a television star than a leader, his priority was to seek short-term 'wins' that he could brag about on Twitter, even if this led to long-term difficulties.³⁴

Examining Trump's early actions in Syria through these three lenses, the second and third explanations fit best. Syria remained high on Trump's agenda, as seen in his launching of Tomahawk missiles – against Bannon's advice – in response to Assad's alleged use of chemical weapons, suggesting that isolationism was not driving policy. But US engagement with the conflict was inconsistent, partly because the administration appeared to compartmentalise the war: a determined strategy to defeat ISIS in the east on the one hand, ambiguity towards Assad, Iran and Russia in the west on the other. While the anti-ISIS campaign did not depart much from Obama's plan, suggesting a more tempered and co-opted Trump, the approach to Assad, Iran and Russia was impulsive and devoid of strategy.

'Bomb the shit' out of ISIS

On the campaign trail, Trump made much of Obama's failings regarding ISIS, suggesting he displayed unnecessary timidity. In November 2015 he declared, 'I would bomb the shit out of 'em. I would just bomb those suckers. That's right. I'd blow up the pipes . . . I'd blow up every single inch. There would be nothing left.' Accordingly, in his first week as president Trump commissioned Mattis to devise within thirty days a new plan to defeat the so-called Caliphate. The defense secretary delivered at the end of February, but the strategy that followed appeared to be a ramped-up version of Obama's approach rather than the promised radical departure. Some even claimed that Trump had ignored the recommendations.³⁵ Two components did shift, however. Even before Mattis delivered his report, Trump loosened control on military field commanders, allowing them to decide whether to drop bombs on areas that might have high civilian populations – something Obama had been stricter on. As a result, civilian casualties in Syria and Iraq skyrocketed. According to Airwars, a monitoring website, more civilians were killed in Trump's first seven months than Obama's entire campaign from September 2014 to January 2017, with the rate of average deaths per month rising from 80 to 380.³⁶

The second shift came in May, when the White House announced that it would be arming the YPG for the first time. Knowing it would outrage Turkey, directly arming the Kurds was avoided by Obama who instead used

the SDF umbrella, which included Arab fighters, as a convenient work-around. Yet the Pentagon knew that, of the estimated 50,000 fighters in the SDF, the 27,000 in the YPG were the best and would be essential for the coming assault on Raqqa.³⁷ They were also sceptical of Ankara's own proposal that Operation Euphrates Shield should take Raqqa instead, especially given its poor performance capturing the much smaller al-Bab. The decision to send 'heavy machine guns, mortars, anti-tank weapons, armoured cars and engineering equipment' to the YPG in May inevitably met with anger from Ankara, even though the US insisted it would try to retrieve the weapons after the battle, and that Raqqa would subsequently be ruled by local Arabs, not Kurds.³⁸ While this pushed Washington and Ankara further apart, it was the logical next step in the PYD-US alliance that had grown since 2015. Indeed, the US reportedly had at least ten military bases on SDF-held territory at this point.³⁹ Obama had been able to avoid making this provocative step because the SDF remained a long way from Raqqa, but his military advisers also believed the YPG was the best bet to conquer the Caliphate's capital.⁴⁰ Had Obama still been president, he may have handled the situation more diplomatically, but the outcome would likely have been similar.

Even before the new arms arrived, the SDF campaign had surged forward. After securing Manbij, the emphasis returned to Raqqa with a staged plan to capture ground around the capital. In November 2016 villages to the north were taken, followed by those to the west in December and those to the east in February 2017. A breakthrough was made in March when the Tabqa dam and airbase – scene of the notorious ISIS massacre of regime troops in 2014 – were both taken. In a sign of how closely the SDF was working with the US, its troops were airlifted alongside US special forces to assault the dam. Tabqa city itself fell in May, allowing SDF forces, led by the YPG, to move south of the city, completing an encirclement in June. In a swift vindication of the decision to arm the Kurds, a month later they had surrounded and besieged up to 4,000 ISIS fighters inside Raqqa, and were slowly advancing. At the same time, the Iraqi army's siege of ISIS-held Mosul was reaching a conclusion, with the city finally falling in mid-July. Meanwhile, in a sign that Assad might prove the major beneficiary of the US campaign, the Tiger Forces took the opportunity to mop up the last ISIS positions in Aleppo province in June. While the advance of the SDF and the empowerment of the YPG would likely lead to problems in the future, by continuing Obama's campaign against ISIS with a few adjustments Trump looked on the verge of the short-term 'tweetable' victory in eastern Syria and Iraq that he craved.

Struggling with Russia, Iran and Assad

Contrary to the relative clarity on ISIS in the east, the administration's approach towards Syria's west was confused. On assuming office, Trump's position on Assad and his two international allies, Russia and Iran, was ambiguous. As recently as October 2016 he had stated, 'I don't like Assad at all, but Assad is killing ISIS. Russia is killing ISIS and Iran is killing ISIS' – implying that his anti-ISIS priorities might lead him into reversing Obama's opposition to the Syrian dictator.⁴¹ Similarly, positive statements about Putin and other strongmen such as Egypt's Abdel Fattah el-Sisi further fuelled speculation along these lines. Confusing matters, it became clear that Trump would be treating Assad's two benefactors very differently. After appointing a series of anti-Iranian figures, including Mattis, the administration adopted a hawkish line regarding Tehran. In contrast, Trump remained broadly positive about Putin, even as his embryonic administration was consumed by a scandal alleging the Kremlin's involvement in his election. These contrasting views played out in Syria, with Washington simultaneously stepping up anti-Iranian activity while softening its stance on Russia. There was even talk of attempting to peel Russia away from Iran, illustrating a misunderstanding of the extent of Iranian-Russian commitment to the conflict.

During the campaign, Trump had spoken out against Obama's 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran, calling it a 'disaster' and 'the worst deal ever negotiated', and suggesting he would seek to overturn it.⁴² In office, these instincts were amplified by his association with three key, closely aligned groups. The first of these were hawkish elements of the Washington foreign policy community, disparagingly labelled 'the Blob' by Obama, who had long opposed Iran and disapproved of the JCPOA, although they did not necessarily wish to overturn it. While many despaired of Trump's domestic rhetoric, they hoped to nudge him towards more confrontation with Tehran, over the objections of Bannon. The second was the Israeli government of Benjamin Netanyahu. Trump had made significant pro-Israel pledges on the campaign trail, including controversially moving the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, and his pro-Israel son-in-law Kushner was a close adviser. In power, Trump would ultimately prove one of the most pro-Israeli US leaders, recognizing Israel's controversial claims over Jerusalem and the Golan Heights and proposing a peace plan that effectively abandoned the internationally accepted parameters of a two-state solution in Israel's favour. Reflecting this, the Netanyahu view of Iran remained prevalent in the White House. The third factor was Saudi Arabia, which Trump visited (along with Israel) during his first foreign trip as pres-

ident in May 2017. There, he and Kushner were impressed (some have argued 'played') by Mohammed bin Salman and, despite criticism of Saudi Arabia on the campaign trail, appeared to fully accept the Saudi view of Iran. At a speech in Riyadh Trump stated provocatively,

For decades, Iran has fuelled the fires of sectarian conflict and terror. It is a government that speaks openly of mass murder, vowing the destruction of Israel, death to America, and ruin for many leaders and nations in this room. Until the Iranian regime is willing to be a partner for peace, all nations of conscience must work together to isolate Iran, deny it funding for terrorism, and pray for the day when the Iranian people have the just and righteous government they deserve.⁴³

It was no coincidence that soon afterwards Saudi Arabia and the UAE launched their boycott of Qatar, with Trump's approval.⁴⁴ Mohammed bin Salman's move for power a month later, when his father named him as Crown Prince and heir to the throne, removing former Obama favourite Mohammed bin Nayef from succession, may also have resulted from a perceived endorsement by Trump. The ease with which Trump abandoned his former hostility to Riyadh and appeared to fully adopt its regional view suggested an alarming capriciousness.

Trump's anti-Iranianism influenced several early confrontations in Assad's Syria. Among the most high-profile came on 7 April 2017, when the White House unilaterally launched fifty-nine Tomahawk missiles on a regime airfield for allegedly using chemical weapons. Despite Assad having given up his chemical weapons in the 2013 Russia-US agreement, opposition activists continued to accuse Damascus of launching low-level attacks using secret stockpiles. The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) investigated these allegations, claiming in February 2017 that regime forces were responsible for three chlorine attacks. Yet Russia, alongside China, vetoed an attempted UN Security Council Resolution by the US, UK and France to impose sanctions, arguing that it put the recently reconvened Geneva IV peace talks in jeopardy.⁴⁵ Partly because of this veto, the Trump administration acted unilaterally two months later. In a far more high-profile attack, on 4 April at least eighty-seven people were killed in the rebel-held town of Khan Sheikhoun by Sarin gas, confirmed months later by the OPCW. As in 2013, the White House declared Assad responsible, while the regime insisted it was the rebels. Eschewing the UN route, Trump sought a range of military options from the Pentagon, reportedly choosing the most modest: a single barrage

of Tomahawks against al-Shayrat air base from which the attack was allegedly launched. Up to twenty Syrian planes were reportedly hit and several regime soldiers were killed, but the impact was negligible and the base was functioning again within days.⁴⁶

Trump's official reason for this sudden anti-Assad strike was to protect the international norm against chemical weapons use, but it served other purposes as well. One was a shot across the bow to Iran – and it is notable that both Saudi Arabia and Israel hailed Trump for his decisiveness. Another was to boost his already flagging domestic support; the president received a burst of praise in the liberal US press after the strike, with CNN's Fareed Zakaria stating 'I think Donald Trump became president of the United States'.⁴⁷ Perhaps most importantly, however, hitting Assad allowed Trump to illustrate the contrast with his *bête noir*, Obama, who had famously stepped back from his own red line four years earlier. Posing as the 'anti-Obama' was the cornerstone of Trump's political brand. Aware that this was a sharp departure from his own record – Trump had lambasted Obama for even considering attacking Assad in 2013 – the president claimed that the gas attack on children in Khan Sheikhoun meant his 'attitude toward Syria and Assad has changed very much'.⁴⁸ Once again, US domestic politics were having consequences in Syria's war.

In what appeared to be a U-turn, administration officials stepped up their anti-Assad rhetoric. Nikki Haley, the US ambassador to the UN who in March had said that 'our priority is no longer to sit there and focus on getting Assad out', now stated that 'Regime change is something that we think is going to happen'.⁴⁹ Days later, on 12 April the US attempted another UN Security Council resolution to condemn the chemical attack, but it was vetoed again by Russia. Moreover, after directly attacking Assad for the first time, Washington now showed a willingness to hit conventional regime forces elsewhere. In May US jets bombed a pro-Assad Shia militia convoy, killing eight near al-Tanf, a Syrian-Iraqi border post controlled by Washington-backed rebels.⁵⁰ In June the US shot down two Iranian drones over Syrian airspace and then a regime jet near Raqqa, claiming it was attacking SDF forces. Far from reconciling himself to Assad, Trump appeared to be more and more hostile to Damascus and its Iranian allies.

However, complicating this picture was Trump's view of Russia. Notwithstanding the president's past praise of Putin, his administration was dogged by allegations of complicity with the Kremlin. Michael Flynn was forced to resign as national security adviser after only twenty-three days when it emerged he had discussed lifting US sanctions on Russia with Moscow's ambassador. Trump aroused further suspicions by firing FBI

director James Comey, who had been investigating Russian interference in the 2016 election, and when the Justice Department appointed Robert Mueller to continue the inquiry afterwards, the president questioned his neutrality. Trump's son, Donald Trump Jr, was also later implicated in the scandal that looked like it would hamper the administration for some time. In this context, Trump's relative friendliness towards Russia in Syria jarred with his belligerent stance on Iran.

As well as some collaboration on the anti-ISIS campaign, Trump softened the US stance on Astana and Moscow's de-escalation zones. As part of this, Trump and Putin, meeting in Germany for the G20 summit in July, agreed on a ceasefire over the southern Badiya region, endorsed by Israel and Jordan though rejected by some rebel groups. Russian relations remained fraught in some areas, with Moscow strongly objecting to the downing of the Syrian jet in June and to Trump's Tomahawk missile strike. However, even then, Washington had given Moscow advance warning to ensure no Russian planes or personnel were at al-Shayrat. In what appeared to be a major unilateral concession to Putin, in July the administration cancelled the CIA 'Timber Sycamore' programme begun by Obama in 2013 supporting vetted Syrian rebel groups. The operations rooms in Jordan were dismantled and salaries would no longer be provided by the US. This was consistent with Trump's pre-presidency views of the rebels – on the campaign he argued 'We have no idea who these people are' – and it was also a reflection of the reality that, since the Russian intervention, the opposition looked doomed. However, the fact that the move was made unilaterally, without gaining an obvious concession from Assad, Russia or Iran in return, appeared a waste of valuable leverage, and some suspected Trump did this partly as a goodwill gesture to Moscow.⁵¹ It also appeared wholly inconsistent with Trump's other anti-Iran and anti-Assad moves, as both would be empowered.

It also undermined his anti-extremism approach, as Jabhat al-Nusra was another beneficiary. Though Nusra had officially disaffiliated itself with al-Qaeda and rebranded itself several times, first as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and then Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), it was still viewed by the US as an Islamist terrorist organisation. Throughout 2017 its powerbase grew, primarily in Idlib province, where it captured most strategic positions, including the Bab al-Hawa border crossing from Ahrar al-Sham. Indeed, Ahrar, HTS' former ally and only plausible rival, faced terminal decline after Turkish support waned and had effectively collapsed by August 2017.⁵² In this context, analysts such as Charles Lister insisted that Trump's decision would inevitably empower HTS, who would mop up unemployed and

underarmed rebels. Others countered that many rebels remained ideologically opposed to extremism, preventing such a process.⁵³ Either way, the decision likely aided Assad's aims to reconquer Idlib. If HTS did take over, he and Russia could justify a military campaign as Nusra/HTS were excluded from any ceasefire agreements in the Geneva/Astana Process. If the remaining rebels resisted the extremists, they would be further divided, making conquest easier. Supporters of Trump's decision were correct that, regardless, this process was probably inevitable, but his critics were also right that the concession was a boost for Assad, Iran and Russia for little in return.

Battles to come

For all Trump's bluster, his arrival in the White House changed little in the immediate dynamics of the Syria conflict, but his ambiguity on Iran, Russia and Assad pointed to possible future confrontations. After Aleppo's fall Assad appeared secure and that trend continued into 2017 despite the Tomahawk missiles and bellicose US rhetoric. Rebel enclaves near Damascus were picked off, with evacuations agreed in Zabadani in April and in the Qaboun, Barzeh and Tishreen neighbourhoods in May. Surrendering fighters were again transported to Idlib, turning the stronghold into a convenient dumping ground before an anticipated final regime assault on the province. Clearing these outliers left Assad facing just a handful of concentrated rebel areas, unlike the patchwork of 2013–14. The Russia–Turkey brokered ceasefire and Astana de-escalation zones kept these areas mostly pacified, but regime forces still frequently launched attacks, claiming they were targeting Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and others not covered by the agreement.

In March the Syrian army, with Russian support, recaptured Palmyra from ISIS for a second time, beginning an unexpected advance east towards Deir ez-Zor – the regime's last bastion in Islamic State territory. There were several reasons for this rapid assault. First and foremost was opportunity. As the SDF advanced to the north, ISIS possessions in the Syrian desert were low-hanging fruit that the regime could pick off with limited numbers while the jihadists concentrated their forces on Raqqa. This was also the first time in the conflict that Syria's west was quiet enough to free up troops to move beyond 'Rump Syria' into the strategically less important east. The second reason was to check the advance of the SDF. The YPG and its allies had advanced rapidly in the last year to the banks of the Euphrates. With American help, the regime feared they might absorb all of the former Caliphate's territory, leaving US bases and special forces stationed throughout

eastern Syria. The third reason according to some Western analysts was that Tehran wanted to create a land corridor from Iran to the Mediterranean, and capturing the desert roads from Iraq into eastern Syria near Al-Bukamal would achieve this. Logistically, however, Iran already had strong air routes connecting Tehran with Damascus, Hezbollah and Lebanon, and a land route would still be prey to insurgent attacks.⁵⁴ Opening such a route represented a symbolic success for Iran, especially given the fears raised in Washington, but was unlikely to be the primary motivator. More key was regaining key resources for the regime: the oil fields of Deir ez-Zor and the return of trade with Iraq from recapturing the border posts. Moreover, like the conquest of Aleppo, the more substantial Syrian territory Assad controlled, the more he could claim international legitimacy.

Yet this race for the east raised the prospect of new conflict. As discussed above, the PYD and the Syrian regime rarely fought, leading many in the opposition to accuse the Kurdish group of collaboration with Assad. There were, however, some clashes as the YPG grew in confidence, with an assault on regime positions in Hassakah in June 2016 resulting in Assad evacuating most army and NDF forces from the city. With Trump now directly arming the YPG and increasing his rhetoric against Iran, some forecasted that conflict would break out between Assad and the Kurds after ISIS was defeated.⁵⁵ There were some grounds for this. The US attacks on Iranian and Syrian forces in al-Tanf and Raqqa in 2017 were aimed at checking the advance eastwards, and it is possible that the unpredictable US president would want to use his Kurdish proxies as a means of scuppering Iranian regional advances. However, on the Kurdish side the PYD knew their limitations and were wary of advancing much beyond Raqqa given these are strictly Arab and traditionally hostile areas. On the regime side, Assad wanted to bring Rojava back under control, either by negotiation or force. The key question was how long the US would stand by the Kurds if and when ISIS was defeated. A long-term US presence would rile Assad but protect Rojava from assault, while a US withdrawal would increase the chances of an attack either by Assad or Turkey, or both.

Assad's eastern ambitions would once again rest on the dynamics within the Assad–Russia–Iran relationship. Although the three acted in concert, relations were not always smooth. As discussed in Chapter 8, Assad was no puppet and often exploited differences between his two patrons to maximise leverage. For example, during the assault on Aleppo in late 2016, Assad's forces sometimes broke ceasefires negotiated between Moscow and Washington with the support of Iranian commanders on the ground, forcing Russia to play catch-up. Similarly, Assad was reportedly uncon-

vinced by Russia's de-escalation zones plan, seeing it as merely a means to buy time before attacking the last rebel strongholds. On the other side, in August 2017 Russia expressed its frustration at Damascus by refusing to authorise air support for an assault on Idlib. However, this does not mean, as some in the Trump administration hoped, that Moscow had any intention of abandoning Assad or Tehran. Russia, like Iran, showed an intention to be in Syria for the long haul, even opening up a third permanent military base, in Khirbet Ras Al-Waer south-east of Damascus, in July 2017. Both states invested in Syria's post-war reconstruction, with Iranian and Russian companies already benefiting.⁵⁶ Russia and Iran had different priorities and slightly different strategies, but for now they appeared in agreement on the future direction of Syria.

Trump styled himself as anti-Obama, but for his first years in office his Syria policy was not the radical departure he claimed. Save for loosening restrictions on bombings, the anti-ISIS campaign stuck to the broad parameters set out by Trump's predecessor, with the decision to arm the Kurds a logical progression in a relationship built under Obama. Even in western Syria, where Trump's policies appeared more chaotic and inconsistent, the outcomes were not so different. Obama had arguably been softer on Iran and more hostile to Russia, while Trump was the reverse, but neither had much impact on preventing either state from advancing their interests in Syria. Like Obama, Trump was generally reactive rather than strategic regarding Assad, resorting to gestures such as his Tomahawk missile strike that had limited impact on the ground. This is perhaps unsurprising, as none of the structural impediments in the region that Obama faced had been removed when Trump came to office. He still had to face opposition from the American public to extensive US boots on the ground – something he had encouraged in his campaign – and the increased assertiveness of other powers such as Iran and Russia pursuing their agendas.

Where Trump differed was in style and bombast, making him far less predictable an operator than Obama. To an extent, this made little difference to western Syria given that, as outlined elsewhere in this book, the United States was not a decisive player in that conflict, unlike Iran and Russia. However, it did have two potential impacts, firstly in eastern Syria where the US emerged as the key external power due to its campaign against ISIS. While this policy was left to the 'adults in the room', were Trump's chaotic character to come to the fore, such as ordering a sudden withdrawal or attacking Iranian/Assad forces, it had the potential to amplify the conflict, as would be seen in 2019. Secondly, Trump remained the US president and, despite a relative regional retrenchment under Obama, as with his predecessor Middle

Eastern powers paid attention to his policies. This was seen with Saudi Arabia's blockade of Qatar following apparent Trump approval. On the one hand, this increased the risk that a badly placed word could provoke negative reactions. On the other hand, with Trump known to be unpredictable, leaders might attach less importance to his comments than they did with Obama. As will be seen, both outcomes ultimately weakened the US' regional position further – another continuation with the Obama era, ironic given Trump's claim to be his predecessor's polar opposite.