

## Motive: Works in Progress

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### *Commentary*

I bare my heart to you, reader, with this draft introduction from a paper about Obama's Syria strategy that—and perhaps here form mirrors content—proved too ambitious and amorphous really to do anything at all. Motive I managed to establish: America's Syria strategy is incoherent. But that motive was so broad, and my goals so lofty, that I failed to craft a real, arguable thesis out of it. I didn't know where to go from it. I knew that I wanted to parse Obama's rhetoric to make a claim about his Syria strategy. I didn't know what sort of claim that would be. Would I try to explain American strategy? Would I point to its holes? Would I predict its future direction? I didn't know. Instead, I ended up with: "Obama has in fact outlined a framework for intervention and appeared to abide by it. However, the gap between suggested expectations and delivery remains—stemming perhaps less from a lack of strategy and more from a half-hearted commitment to resolving the conflict." I still can't tell what I meant by that. I certainly didn't know at the time.

In my final attempt, I think I came slightly closer to the mark. I decided that my goal was to explain what appeared to be strategic incoherence. My thesis turned into: "But whether or not Obama has taken the best tack in Syria, his decisions and rhetoric imply a value and priority ranking that lends some level of coherence to his policy—suggesting lack of commitment to resolving the conflict itself rather than strategic failure."

That revised version was better, but still not quite there. In retrospect, I think what I really wanted to do was to analyze Obama's rhetoric to derive the strategic framework he declared publicly, and then to compare it to his Syria policy. Did they match?

Five months after the fact, I think that my problem was one of framing. I established a broad umbrella motive but didn't—implicitly or explicitly—turn it into a question. Without a clear question (motive), how could I have an answer (thesis)?

### *Excerpt*

President Obama is known for sharp syntax and short sentences. "I'm going to be working with Congress. We have set up a draft authorization. We're going to be asking for hearings and a prompt vote," he declared, succinctly, as he proposed airstrikes to Congress in September 2013.<sup>1</sup> But that crisp, careful language disappeared two paragraphs later when the President attempted to define American policy in Syria: "We have [a strategy] to make sure that we can bring about over time the kind of strengthening of the opposition and the diplomatic and

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<sup>1</sup> Obama, "Remarks by the President Before Meeting with Members of Congress on the Situation in Syria."

economic and political pressure required so that ultimately we have a transition that can bring peace and stability not only to Syria but to the region.”<sup>2</sup> The confusion of that almost indecipherable sentence mirrors a larger confusion in America’s Syria policy—a policy that has appeared to develop haphazardly over the past four years, faced with a devolving situation on the ground and near-constant criticism at home. An August 2014 survey found that 73% of Americans worried that the U.S. did not have a strategy for combating ISIL.<sup>3</sup> On October 9, the *New York Times* editorial board condemned “an incoherent Syria war strategy,” arguing that “the initial plan was dubious. This new one is hallucinatory.”<sup>4</sup> Such criticism is not new. In a 2011 article, international law professor Amos Guiora wrote that “President Obama’s policy (assuming a coherent policy exists)” fails on two fronts: “inconsistency in determining under what conditions intervention is justified, and a sharp dissonance between suggested expectations and actual delivery.”<sup>5,6</sup> Today, the first half of that attack seems unfair. President Obama has in fact outlined a framework for intervention and appeared to abide by it. However, the gap between suggested expectations and delivery remains—stemming perhaps less from a lack of strategy, and more from a half-hearted commitment to resolving the conflict.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> “73% Worry About Obama’s Lack of Strategy for ISIS.”

<sup>4</sup> The Editorial Board, “An Incoherent Syria War Strategy.”

<sup>5</sup> Guiora, “Intervention in Libya, Yes; Intervention in Syria, No: Deciphering the Obama Administration.”

<sup>6</sup> Similarly, writing about modern “gray area” conflict, Antonia Chayes argues that “the United States has not developed enduring criteria to indicate when it may be useful for great powers to intervene in another country with or without force.” And Michael O’Hanlon echoes the second half of the critique, undermining the “glaring mismatch between ends and means” today. (O’Hanlon, 2015)