



## The Use of Chemical Weapons: The United States Response and Strategies in the Syrian Civil War

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### **Abstract**

This research aims at exploring the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian conflict, in particular, the dilemma of the American policymakers in response to the use of prohibited weapons in the Syrian conflict. The use of chemical weapons in Syria has been a major source of tension, but one could wonder what were the strategies employed by the US in responding to use of chemical weapons in Syria. Syrian crisis has been marked by a number of horrible acts of conventional violence, we can see that this conventional brutality was insufficient to lead to the US interventionist foreign policy. Why was it thought that the use of chemical weapons would determine whether or not the US would intervene militarily? These are some of the issues that this paper typically identifies. The study collected, examined, and analyzed secondary data on the US response using a qualitative case study approach. The arguments produced in this study were based on three theoretical frameworks: constructivism, strategic narrative, and framing concept. According to the study's findings, there have been three major strategies. The US utilized framing, the taboo against chemical weapons, and intervention strategies in carrying out a response to the use of chemical weapons in Syria.

**Keywords:** *United States; Syrian Civil War; Chemical Weapons; Strategic Narrative; Framing Effects*

### **Introduction**

Since the beginning of human history, conflicts have existed and are likely to continue endlessly. Our ability to resolve conflicts, which are not just brought on by apparent differences in values and interests but also by hostilities, is fully dependent upon how we manage them. The most catastrophic conflicts, such as interstate and civil wars, involve coercive, violent modes of confrontation between the parties, which result in casualties, societal devastation, and its various forms that go beyond merely physical violence. It has included certain nonviolent elements like the pursuing of various goals and the scarcity of resources. Any major societal change that involves potential conflict is neither essential nor inevitable (Jeong, 2008).

The Middle Eastern nation of Syria has long been embroiled in an internal war between Bashar al-Assad's supporters and those who opposed him. In March 2011, nonviolent anti-government protests against the Syrian government started in a few regions of the country before spreading nationwide

(Sterling, 2012). President Assad authorized a nationwide crackdown on demonstrators to lessen the intensity of the continuing demonstrations in Syria. The Syrian government used violence and aggressiveness as a response to the large-scale protest, which led to widespread building destruction (including mosques, churches, and schools), fatalities, and the outflow of refugees to other parts of the globe.

The protest that led to the conflict in Syria was triggered due to the political turmoil and revolution which was circulating in the Middle East known as the Arab Spring and Syria was one of the countries that were hit by this political turmoil in the Middle Eastern region. Governments were overthrown by mass protest and demonstration because of the totalitarian rule these countries were facing, which has successfully end long-term regimes in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya (JASSER, 2014). In May 2012, the international committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) declared that Syria was involved in a non-international armed conflict. Since then, the Syrian government has been engaged in fighting with the Free Syrian Army and an opposition movement that consist of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (Laub & Masters, 2013).

The conflict in Syria has caused one of the worst humanitarian crises in history; the United Nations has reported that about more than 400,000 people have died since 2011, more than 1.7 million are now refugees and about 4.5 million has already internationally displaced and the majority of these people are women and children. Over 11.7 million people need urgent humanitarian assistance and protection.(OCHA, 2019)One of the prominent debates that surround the Syrian conflict is the use of Chemical weapons. Since 2013 the Syrian government has been continuously accused to be using chemical weapons to carry out attacks against the civilian population, these accusations are accompanied with images and videos on social media that showed the remains of chemical munitions and victims that have been poison by chemical warfare agents and it has been seen as a big concern for the international community.

The main question that circulates the Syrian conflict is, have chemical weapons been used in the Syrian conflict and if it has used, who is responsible? But so far what has been reported on social media and news platforms is that, the Syrian government is using chemical weapons against its people and which has been reported to have claimed dozens of lives, but the Syrian government with their allies Russia have stand firm to contempt all these allegations of the use of chemical weapons in the ongoing Syrian conflict. The use of prohibited weapons in warfare is term as a war crime and crime against humanity.

Syria agreed become a party to the 1925 Geneva Protocol in 1968, which prohibits the use any form of bacteriological, asphyxiating, poisonous or other gases during war, but it was until October 2013 when it became part of the Chemical Weapons Convention. The Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) is an international treaty that entered into force in 1997, which prohibits the development, production, acquisition, stockpiling, retention, transfer or use of chemical weapons (CW) [1,2]. The Syrian government has been ambiguous in several public statements on the capacity of Chemical Weapons (Pita & Domingo, 2014).

Despite the ongoing war crimes and crimes against humanity with evidence, the United States and its allies are just focused on the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian conflict. The risk of chemical weapons has created a series of warnings from the United States, the United Kingdom and France (Blake & Aqsa, 2013). Leaders from all three countries make it clear that the use of chemical weapons would prompt a strong response, perhaps including military intervention.

August 20, 2012. The United States President Barack Obama during an emergency news conference at the Washington, DC, White House he said:

*“We have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus [regarding US military engagement with Syria]. That would change my equation. ... We have put together a range of contingency plans. We have communicated in no uncertain terms with every player in the region that that’s a red line for us and that there would be enormous consequences if we start seeing movement on the chemical weapons front or the use of chemical weapons, that would change my calculations significantly” (Obama, 2012).*

President Barack Obama warned the Syrian government that the use of chemical weapons in Syria’s ongoing civil war would be crossing a red line that would be met with huge consequences. After a year, President Obama’s made a tough speech, saying that it has appeared that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is using chemical weapons against the Syrian people and make the case that the Syrian government was responsible for the attacks of chemical weapons near Damascus on August 2013, but did not inform the people about the intelligence that, the Syrian government was not the party in the conflict that was having access to sarin and nerve agents that was found during a UN study in Syria.

It was known to the US government that there was a jihadi group called Al-Nusra which has an affiliation with the al Qaida, who had mastered the knowledge of creating sarin and was very capable to manufacture sarin agents in high quality (Hersh, 2013). In response to the chemical weapons attack in Damascus, the US government changed its foreign policy towards the Syrian conflict from just providing humanitarian aid to the opposition forces, but also providing the opposition with military support. The Syrian government has been facing these allegations of using chemical weapons in seven separate attacks on the Syrian people. Some of the munitions showed were thermobaric aerial bombs or devices that could be used to distribute riot control agents, while images of the clinical signs of victims which were not enough to prove the use of chemical warfare agent. In some cases, videos of use chemical weapons seemed to be a form of propaganda campaigns that comes from the government and oppositions of the conflict (Pita & Domingo, 2014, Chapters 3(2), 391–402).

On April 7, 2018, a suspected chemical weapons (CW) attack took place in Douma, Syria, left many dead and sickened hundreds more. While terrible images coming from the Douma attack have been going around the media and it had the world’s attention, The United States accused the Syrian government of using forbidden chemical weapons at least 50 times since Syria’s civil war started. The accusation was pronounced by the American ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki R. Haley, during a bitter exchange with her Russian colleague at a meeting of the Security Council, which was focused on a suspected chemical weapons assault in a Damascus suburb. The United States and its allies have held the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad responsible for the attack. President Trump has articulated outrage over the assault in the Douma and threatened a military response (New York Times, 2018).

Despite the growing number of the attacks of chemical weapons in Syria, which is constantly, reported on various news platform and social media, with very sad images and videos, that shown peoples being brutally attacked. The US has for long been considering to a response to the use of chemical weapons, after the foreign policy scandal of the Iraq invasion and failure in Afghanistan, the US was in dilemmas to come up with a strategy to make a response on the alleges use chemical weapons in Syria. The Syrian conflict has created a huge dilemma for the United States policymakers especially the use of chemical weapons. How did the US respond to the use of chemical weapons where there were no clear options of the US foreign policy? It is in the US interest to avoid further use of chemical weapon in the Syrian conflict. It was a moment in the political spectrum that another war would not be likely supported because of the miscalculation that occurred in the Iraq invasion. Bringing an end to the use of chemical weapons in Syria seems exceptionally difficult. This paper will show what were the strategies employed in responding to the use of chemical weapons in Syria.

The article will consist of four sections. The opening section will discuss about the theoretical frameworks employed in study which will lay the foundation for the discussion in this paper. The paper will focus on the debate of the strategies employed by the United States in responding to the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian crisis. The second will highlight the significance of the use of chemical weapons in the development of the Syrian conflict, especially understanding the US response. Third section will discuss the US response and strategies to the crisis in Syria against the use of chemical weapons. Finally, the closing section will lay out conclusions on the findings of the research.

## ***Theoretical Framework***

### **Constructivism**

Constructivists challenge the materialist and rationalist notion of the mainstream of international relations theory by arguing that international relations or the international system are socially constructed and that these structures are accountable for forming the identities of the actors rather than just their behaviors. Constructivism holds that whether people act as individuals or as social groups, they construct the world in which they live and act in accordance with those constructions. As a result, people's beliefs and assumptions become significant when they are shared by a community or group of people, particularly when they serve the community or group's sense of identity and distinctive interest. This is how the constructivist sees the world order (Copeland, 2005).

Constructivists argue that the social construction of world affairs as opposed to the claim of neo-realists that international politics is shaped by the rational choice behavior and decisions of individualist actors who pursue their interests by creating effective calculations to make the most of their benefits and minimize their losses, therefore the materiality of international structures. It was established in the late 1980s and beginning of the 1990s by such thinkers as Nicholas Onuf, and Emanuel Adler and Alexander Wendt (1999). Constructivism has a presence in international relations. International Relations theories, particularly neorealism, are materialist in nature; they focus on how the distribution of material power, such as military and economic capabilities, defines the balances of power among states and explains their behavior. Such a material emphasis is rejected by constructivists. They contend that social, not material, issues are the most significant aspect of international relations. Additionally, they contend that social reality is neither objective nor foreign to those who watch international activities. The fundamental focus of constructivism is on human consciousness or awareness. The international system is not a set structure like the solar system. It takes place as an inter-subjective knowledge amongst individuals, where the system is made up of ideas rather than material forces (Wendt, 1992).

The constructivist theoretical viewpoint would examine how the US strategy in reaction to the deployment of chemical weapons in Syria was built and what the common beliefs that underpin the US policy are. The US's construction of the intervention as a global issue and how it was used to punish the Syrian government for carrying out attacks on its people are two more perspectives on the US strategy in reaction to the deployment of chemical weapons through the constructivist lens. The US has been examining alternatives to address the Syrian issue for a while, and by proving that the Syrian dictatorship used force against its citizens, they will have the legal right to act.

### **Strategic Narrative**

The concept of Strategic narrative is crucial in understanding the shared meanings events and issues in international relations. It is often used by political actors in constructing shared meanings of specific event or issues concerning international affairs to shape actors' behavior in international politics. (Wendt, 1992) Political leaders often make a narrative of international affairs to influence the understanding of domestic and international actors. The strategic narrative effectively shapes actor's identities, interests and understanding of international relations and issues that are likely to develop.

Conceptually, Strategic narrative is a framework that allows political actors to connect or unconnected seemingly phenomena in international relations by changing the meaning of the story around the narrative of that phenomenon. Strategic narrative helps to explain the dynamics around the shaping of political legitimacy, international order and political outcome. Actors tend to focus on the relationship between great powers to help understand the way narratives play an important role in how major powers pursue to shape the international order. A strategic narrative is often used as a tool by states to articulate their values, interests, ambitions for international affairs (Miskimmon et al., 2015). It also provides us with a framework in which shared ideas are achieved. There are many narratives in international relations, for example, the chemical weapons taboo, democratic states don't go to war with each other, the responsibility to protect and so on, but these narratives are strategically used by state to achieve certain interest or goal. Many scholars of international relations have struggled to come up with explanations on the process of changing norms and ideas in the field of international relations.

### **The Concept of Framing**

Foreign policy and international relations are frequently influenced by individuals, groups, organizations, and states who want to impose their own goals, objectives, and actions on others. President Ronald Reagan's description of the Soviet Union as the "Evil Empire," the Arab and Israeli leaders' ongoing blaming of each other for the Intifada, and former US President George H. W. Bush's comparison of Saddam Hussein to Adolf Hitler are all noteworthy examples of this. In international relations and foreign policy debate, the framing issue has been recognized and utilized as a tactic to discredit groups, organizations, and states (Mintz & Redd, 2003).

According Tversky and Kahneman framing decisions referred to:

“The decision-maker's conception of the acts, outcomes, and possibilities associated with a particular choice. The frame that a decision-maker adopts is controlled partly by the norms, habits, and personal characteristics of the decision-maker” (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981, pp. 453–458).

Tversky and Kahneman continued to explain that it is reasonably possible to frame any particular decision in several different ways. In the same vein, Frisch uses the term “framing” in referring to the experimental conclusions that individuals often respond in different ways to different issues of the same decision problem. (Frisch, 1993, pp. 399–429) According to Feldman the issue framing focus attention on particular dimensions and also explains actions for understanding issues (Quandt et al., 1993).

Framing is perhaps the least well-developed central concept of prospect theory, but it is important to note that framing is both a central concept to prospect theory and remarkably not that much developed in the formal literature of prospect theory. This makes the use of framing in social science field a methodological issue of serious significance. It is particularly taken seriously in international relations since political leaders frequently use the information and claim to persuade decision-makers (allies, rivals, the public, the media and other actors) in the international arena to assume particular frames, which is by the using political manipulation. Framing mostly comes as an attempt at political manipulation, which is used when an actor targets another actor and attempts to influence the behaviors and actions of that actor.

To answer the questions in this paper in a meaningful and systematically way, three theoretical frameworks will be referred to and used as the foundation of this research. The first being the constructivist approach as represented by Alexander Wendt in his book “Social Theory of International Relation (1999)”, which was recognized being one of the first scholars in realizing the wake for the collapse of the Soviet Union, which was referred to as the New World Order. Constructivism came about as a response to the neorealism claims of international relation. The second theoretical framework which will be used as one of the bases of this research is the inter-subjectivity approach which explained how social facts are created and how meaning is attached to social facts; this approach can be referred to the work of Wendt “Anarchy Is What States Make of It”. The theoretical framework that will be used to

answer this research question is the concept of framing. This approach is often taken by powerful states and political leaders in painting negative facts to their rival and opponent; it is taken as a serious issue in international relations and foreign policy decisions.

### **Methodology**

This paper will use a qualitative research methodology, which consists components such as observations, documents and visual images that each has functions and limitations (John W. Creswell, 2018). Based on the case study above the author decides to use secondary data, namely data that has been processed and published and will be supported by several visual images. The research method will be used to explore topics and to find answers to the research question. A single case study is a perfect method for this research because the main aim of this paper is to develop a deep understanding of a single case in its real-world context (Yin, 2017).

The research done for this paper will mainly consist of analyzing written works ranging from secondary sources. Sources will mainly be in the form of speeches, statements, documents and policy white papers from several governmental institutions and international organizations. Secondary sources, such as books and articles written by scholars and experts will be of importance too, especially when it comes to the historical analysis of US - Syrian relations. To prevent being bias in the analysis of US foreign policy, a wide range of sources from various backgrounds will be used.

The data collected from various sources will be analyzed with the help of international relations theories. IR theories should be able to provide relevant theoretical frameworks through which the data collected can make sense about the Syrian conflict. This is because of the complexity of the Syrian civil war, which is characterized by the involvement of international groups, states and coalitions of groups and states taking part in the conflict. As a result, the United States foreign policy towards the Syrian conflict is not limited to the use of chemical weapons, but many other factors as well. Thus, International relations theory will assist us to understand US foreign policy in the Syrian civil war and some of the factors behind the response to the use of chemicals weapons in the Syrian conflict.

### **Syria and Chemical Weapons**

Chemical weapons are still a crucial component of warfare in the 21st century, despite attempts by the international community to ban them from state and non-state actor's arsenals. They are commonly referred to as poor 'man's atomic bomb' as similarly biological weapons which is another formula of non-nuclear weapons of mass destruction. While chemical weapons lack the power of mass destruction whether tactical or even strategic, they can be easier acquired or produce and they have a devastating effect even when the use of it is merely threatened (Robert J. Bunker, 2020). Chemical weapons also have military functionalities in which it can be used to killing and degrading opposition troop formations area. It can also use to ground aircrew because of the effects of myopia. The threat of chemical weapons attacks can cause psychological effects on military unit and forces to carry out missions in an area where chemical weapons attacks have occurred.

The Arab Republic of Syria was not a party to the 1993 Convention on the Prohibition of the Production, Development, Stockpiling, Transfer and the Use of Chemical Weapons, until October 2013, which consists of 189 countries. However, Syria is a party to the 1925 Geneva Gas protocol, which prohibits the use of poisonous and other gasses in warfare. Syria is also a party to 1968 on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons and has signed the 1972 Biological and Toxic Weapons Convention but has not ratified the convention. The use of chemical weapons is a ban under the customary international humanitarian law. The use of chemical weapons prohibitions applied to all kind of armed conflict, including both international and non-international armed conflict, which means it also applied to the

ongoing conflict in Syria. Syria has supported the complete prohibition on chemical weapons during the 1977 First Committee of the United Nations General Assembly (Diab, 1997, p. 104).

Syria is assumed to have made efforts in acquiring biological and chemical weapons at a very early stage and it is currently claimed to have one of the most advanced capabilities of chemical weapons in the Middle East. The question of when Syria established their chemical weapons program is generally disputed, but according to many sources, Syria is said to have acquired chemical weapons from Egypt in 1972 before the War against Israel but did not put it to use during the cause of the war. The main purpose of this transfer of chemical weapons was to create a deterrent strategy in case Israel decides on using chemical weapons, in other words, it was intended to achieve a strategic equilibrium, but it was unsuccessful. It is difficult to presume the sophistication and range of the chemical weapon that Syria appears to have obtained.

According to the Nuclear Threat Initiative and Global Security, the Syrian government is said to have chemical weapon arsenals that possess mustard gas, sarin and probably VX. Many assumed that Damascus may be the center of the Syrian weapons of mass destruction program. The Syrian weapons of mass destruction are highly classified and their chemical weapons capacity might be one of the best in the region. Syria has publicly acknowledged the possession of chemical weapons in July 2012. Several years before this acknowledgement by the Syrian government, the US intelligence has made claims that Syria was in -possession of chemical weapons stockpile (Kimball, 2019).

Walid al-Moallem the Syrian Foreign Minister said on September 10, 2013, announced that the Syrian government will welcome discussions on Russia's plan for Syria to give up their chemical weapons and also join the Chemical Weapons Convention. A few days later the Syrian government sent a letter which was a legislative decree signed by Based al-Assad to the United Nations Secretary-General in accessing Syria to the Chemical Weapons Convention. The letter stated that Syria observes the obligations of the Chemical Weapons Convention thirty days from the date of accession in accordance with the treaty (Kimball, 2019, p. 5).

## **The United States Response and Strategies**

This section will identify numerous key issues that lay the basis of the US strategy in response to the use of chemical weapons in Syria especially response towards the incidents of chemical weapons in Syria. The US strategy will be analyses from different perspectives that have been structured on three main analytical subsections as follows.

### **Framing Strategy**

It is often seen in foreign policy and international relations that an actor attempting to frame individuals, groups, intuitions and organizations in most cases their opponents to achieve certain policies and actions. This same observation can be demonstrated through the US strategy in response to the alleged use of chemical weapons in Syria. After the first alleged attack of chemical weapons in August 2013, President Obama tried to make the case that the Syrian government was responsible for the use of chemical weapons on its own people, but he failed to mention that the Syrian government was not the only ones with access to chemical weapons in the Syrian conflict and he admitted the assumptions around the attack as facts. Before the alleged attack took place the US intelligence produced several classified reports stating that other parties of the Syrian conflict such as al-Qaida and al-Nusra had mastered the art of making chemical weapon such as sarin and they were capable of manufacturing them in huge quantity. Despite this intelligence, the Obama administration continued to blame the Syrian regime of the attack, therefore, framing the Syrian government of using chemical weapons on its people based on the images and videos of the attack. The aftermath of the alleged attack of chemical weapons, researches proved that the alleged attack which involved the use of chemical weapons agents were used by the rebels (Hersh, 2013).

Additionally, Obama firmly laid the responsibility of the alleged chemical weapons attack in Ghouta on the Syrian government and he was determined to respond against the Syrian government through limited military strikes without fully knowing who was responsible for the attack on August 21, 2013. His actions were seen as a backing of the threat he made on chemical weapons activity in Syria and reference to the red line. The US misrepresentation of facts about the attack showed its readiness to ignore any information that can undermine the narrative that the Syrian government has used chemical weapons on its own people.

Tversky and Kahneman claim that framing decision is the decision-maker's perception of the acts, outcomes, and contingencies associated with a particular choice. The frame that a decision-maker assumes can be measured partly by the personal characteristics, norms and habits of the decision-maker. They explained that it is relatively possible for states and other actors to frame any specific decision on other actors in various ways. In this case, the US framed the Syrian government for being responsible for allegations of chemical weapons in Syria in order to trigger a military intervention and also a multilateral response from the international community (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981).

The strategy of framing is often seen as a crucial tool of the US foreign policy, from Ronald Reagan administration addressing the Soviet Union as the Evil Empire to George H.W. Bush referring to Saddam Hussein like Hitler. We also saw that the 2003 Iraq invasion was entirely framed on the intelligence that Saddam Hussein was in possession of weapons of mass destruction, which threaten the national security of the US and this was later known to be a false claim after the US could not find any stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction. The US war in Afghanistan shown more evidently of how significant framing strategy had been used in the US foreign policy, after the September 11, President Bush repeatedly framed any opposition of supporting the terrorists that were not in support of the US war on terrorism saying that "Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists". Initially, the US framed the war in Afghanistan as a war on terror and later reframed it as a humanitarian intervention (Mintz & Redd, 2003, p. 205).

The framing strategy was effectively used to assert responsibility for the alleged use of chemical and there was no way military intervention could be triggered without an assessment of who was responsible for the chemical weapons attack. The US knew framing the Assad regime for the chemical weapons attack would pressure the Assad government to hand over its chemical weapons arsenal and also joining the Chemical Weapons Convention or else they would suffer the consequences of a multilateral response. After the US decision to carry out limited strikes in Syria, the Assad government agreed to join the CWC and hand over its chemical weapons program. Despite the UN investigations into the allegations of chemical weapons and eventually, concluding that chemical weapons were used but the responsibility of the attack could be assigned, the US responded by saying that according to the intelligence they have on the assessment of chemical weapons use in Syria, they are highly confident that the chemical weapons attack was carried out the Syrian government. (Hersh, 2013, p. 4) The US repeatedly made references to images and videos online of the alleged attack as facts that could not be denied and the circulation of such images and videos has created a sense of pressure against the Syrian government. Research has shown that most of the images and video that are mostly circulated online on alleged attacks of chemical sometimes lack credibility (Pita & Domingo, 2014).

Furthermore, another observation of the framing strategy of the US in response to the use of chemical weapons in Syria was the way the US used the concept of weapons of mass destruction in the debate surrounding intervention in Syria. Obama initially applied the concept of WMD in a statement on Syria which is term as an inflammable language in international politics. Labelling the use of chemical weapons in Syria as a threat of WMD would make it sufficient to justify for a military intervention in Syria and also priority issue to the international community. This was specifically the excuse made in the Iraq invasion, applying such concept to the issue would trigger fear to policymakers. If the Syrian chemical weapons could be acknowledged as weapons of mass destruction, then it would be absolutely an



obligation on the US to intervene in Syria militarily. But the application of this concept was dropped entirely after Syria agreed to join the CWC and give up its chemical arms because continuing to apply such concepts would affect the negotiations which would see Syria handing over its chemical weapons arsenal and also increase pressure for the US military intervention (Bentley, 2014, p. 1044).

The framing strategy was evidently an important tool in the US response to the alleged use of chemical weapons in Syria and it has significantly shaped the narratives on the use of chemical weapons in Syria. It has made the Syrian government helpless of pressures from the international community and likely, any future attacks of chemical weapons would absolutely hold the Syrian government accountable. By emphasizing the seriousness of the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime through the framework of weapons of mass destruction, the US could more successfully portray this case as demanding a multilateral response. The debate was framed in a manner that if the international community refuses to intervene it would be seen as ignoring a threat to global security. Therefore, the framing strategy was effectively applied in the response to the use of chemical weapons in Syria in order to shape a multilateral response, particularly in relations to the commitment of the chemical weapon taboo. The application of this strategy rendered a sense of political advantage, which was strategically used to influence and gather international support for US foreign policy on Syria.

### **The Chemical Weapon Taboos**

The use of chemical weapons has been constructed as a factor in triggering the foreign policy of the US in reference to Syria. It was clearly outlined by the US that any use of prohibited weaponry such as chemical weapon by the Syrian government would be seen as an intolerable act, one that can cause a shift in the US stands towards the Syrian conflict. But one might question why chemical weapons? Looking at the Syrian conflict which is characterized by a series of unspeakable cases of convectional violence, why should chemical weapons be the deciding factor? Why was the use of chemical weapons seen as an intolerable act of aggression, when other forms of brutality that are being carried out on civilians not enough to bring about an interventionist foreign policy? The answer to these questions lies within the notion that surrounds chemical weapons or the chemical weapons taboo, the idea that deployment of such weapons is characteristically stigmatized (Bentley, 2014).

There is an existing socially constructed idea that is attached to chemical weapons and its use, they are considered being highly destructive in respect to their classification of being weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and discriminated in terms of their effect. The use of chemical weapons far exceeds the acceptable limit in warfare that their prohibition is deemed necessary. According to this framework of understanding, the US strategy towards the use of chemical weapons in Syria reflects a normative expectancy that the use of such weapons signifies a punishable and grievous act of violence. This can be reflected in numerous convections, such as the 1899 Hague Convection, the 1925 Geneva Protocol and also the 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention. Significantly the chemical weapon taboo is still holding a very powerful normative pressure in international relations, not just an explanation for the US strategy in responses to the use of chemical weapons in Syria, while conventional violence has not been a general focus point in the Syrian conflict because of other political concerns, but the use of chemical weapons was something that could not be ignored.

Although the chemical weapon taboo plays a crucial role in understanding US foreign policy towards Syria, it has been used strategically in terms of responding to the use of chemical weapons in Syria. The US response to the use of chemical weapons in Syria was not adopted with respect to the taboo, but it was used to rhetorically to facilitate and reflect political goals. Furthermore, the chemical weapons rhetoric was applied to force an understanding of intervention not being the concern of the US but also an international concern. In 2013, President Obama called for a multilateral approach to the use of chemical weapons in Syria, thereby applying the concept of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) to control domestic and international expectations regarding intervention. However, the chemical weapon

taboo imposes great pressure on political actors but this is not the case to some extent when it comes to Syria.

Though the US involvement in the Syrian conflict recently defined by the use of chemical weapons, but during the beginning of the Syrian conflict the Syrian government capability of chemical weapons stockpiles was rarely not seen as a concern to the US and they were hardly commented on. In fact, President Obama even failed to mention it his speech during the state of the address in 2012, when discussing the Syrian conflict, the chemical weapon was not indicated as a threat and not alone its protection. The issue of chemical became a serious concern and a great threat to the US foreign policy and national security in the national emergency on Syria by the Obama administration. This concern intensified during the cause of 2012, with President Obama frequently stressing that any employment of chemical weapons in Syria would be the game-changer for the US position in the Syrian conflict. By doing so, Obama drew a red line in his famous statement on what would trigger the intervention approach of the US foreign policy on Syria (BBC News, 2012).

This statement remains questionable whether it was mentioned in relation to the commitment to the ban on chemical weapons because the taboo has never been mentioned at this stage. The reason behind Obama's approach in drawing the red line is still open to debate. One aspect that can be drawn from the statement is the support it presented for the chemical weapon taboo. Obama acknowledged that the use of chemical weapons in an intolerable act, which demands great political attention. Furthermore, the statement may be seen as a means to show power through the use of uncompromising language. Despite these debates around Obama's statement in drawing the red line for US foreign policy on Syria, it may be difficult to conclude on the exact intension behind the statement but one aspect is clear that this statement was not anticipated as a threat because it did not state any demands from the Syrian government and another aspect is that the statement was directed at Assad regime.

Despite the first allegation of the use of chemical weapons in Syria by the Syrian government on its people, President Obama maintains a non-interventionist strategy, which was seen by many as a caution to avoid creating another Iraq. Obama insisted that there must be incredible evidence on the allegations before any interventionist approach can be taken; this was due to the concerns of the reliability of the first alleged attack of chemical weapons. The first allegation did not meet the conditions for US unilateral intervention, which made the US very focus on the investigations on the use of chemical weapons. However, discussions about the US commitment to the taboo began to emerge. Many began to speculate that Obama drew the red line in relation to other political motives not safeguarding the taboo, otherwise being politically complex to draw the red line. Obama's adherence to the non-intervention strategy after the emergence of the first allegation of the use of chemical weapons after establishing a red line placed the US into a corner. From this point onwards Obama begins to adopt the explicit language of the chemical weapons taboo.

The rhetoric increasingly escalated after the alleged attack on August 28, 2013, in Ghouta, which was confirmed by the US government that the Syrian government used sarin in the attack. However, the escalation was not solely because of the taboo, but also in reference to the red line placed by President Obama. This is particularly evident of the rhetoric being the cornerstone of US response to the use of chemical weapons in Syria. When looking at the strategy in response to the use of chemical weapons in Syria, one should not reduce this case to the argument that the taboo was used in dictating the US foreign policy and its response on Syria, which was established through referring to the norms of the taboo concerning the future US response on the use of chemical weapons, which inevitably made the US to tied its protection, to a level where the US became entangled within such narrative and this gave the US control over when to used such narrative for its strategy. For instance, immediately after the first allegation of chemical weapons attack saw a period there was increased pressure for the US intervention because many assumed that the red line was broken, but this was a time which Obama strategically

changed the terms of the red line to control the situation and expectation of what the US response would be. Precisely, Obama became the dictator of what form of chemical weapons activity required a response.

Furthermore, by successfully making the criteria for chemical weapons violations unclear, the reconstruction of the taboo by Obama precluded demands for intervention, making the trigger for response blurred then if the international community could not determine whether or not the red line was being crossed, policy-makers would not demand a response. Through this uncertainty, Obama could control the US response expressly to when intervention is needed. To further broaden the discussion on the strategic employment of the chemical weapon taboo would be, by looking at the way the US used taboo to construct response and intervention on the use of chemical weapons in Syria as the responsibility of the international community.

Despite the US being the focus in responding to such violation of the taboo, the statements from the US concerning the violation of the taboo were framed in a manner that influenced the international context to be in line with the US interest. This development started with the use of the taboo to distinguish the US from controversies on the red line. This was achievable through the construction of a policy narrative which points on one selected side of understanding, which is stating that the taboo is part of an international norm. Through the presentation of the taboo as a global concept, one that came to existence through the collective consent of the international community, the US reconstructs the red line as an ideational pressure which previously existed. This was a pre-existing belief in the international system that the use of chemical weapons was unacceptable. In this way, the taboo was displayed as an inherently international commitment.

The chemical weapon taboo was effectively used as a strategy in creating a response to the alleged use of chemical weapons in Syria, by drawing a red line to chemical weapons activity made it easy for a response to be demand and by also constructing the taboo as a global responsibility to protect it, also forced an understanding that multilateral response was needed not just from the US By applying the concept constructivist approach in this context, therefore, analysis can address the ideals of the chemical weapons taboo, but through the strategic narrative framework analysis have explored that the ideal of the taboo can be exploited for other political approaches and interest. Significantly, the analysis is not suggesting that every application of the taboo involved manipulation, but to indicate that there is a potential for the taboo to be used as basic in shaping actor's actions and perceptions in respect to foreign policy.

### **Intervention Strategy**

The interventionist approach was also another strategy in response to the alleged use of chemical weapons in Syria. Although, many might argue that the intervention was taken as a strategy to respond to the use of chemical weapons in Syria to show deterrence but so far this research has argued that the Syrian intervention was successfully constructed by the US as an international concern, one which was laid as the responsibly of all states to act on it, not only the US This strategy was essentially applied by the US, in order to avoid criticism and pressure surrounding the intervention debate. In effect, this strategy would counter the concern that the Syrian intervention could be perceived as a reoccurrence of what happened in the case of the Iraq invasion. By asserting the understanding that chemical weapons were an international issue, one which the responsibility for any response would be globally absorbed, in this way the US could avoid a situation whereby any US action would be viewed through the same controversial framework as Iraq. If the Syrian intervention could be successfully constructed as a global response, then it would not become another scandal of the US foreign policy, that is, the use of chemical weapons in Syria would not be seen as Saddam's stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction. The intervention strategy was employed to trigger a multilateral response; the US has clearly stated its preference for multilateral action rather than a unilateral response by the United States. Given the case of the use of chemical weapons and its terrible nature, it would be appropriate to assume that the US strategy

to respond to the use was a genuine approach, but within a larger framework leaves a room for the idea to be used strategically. Critically, the construction of the Syrian intervention as a multilateral response implied the US intention to contribute to the military actions to be taken in Syria but wants to carry out such actions within an international context.

The interventionist strategy was initially avoided by the Obama administration because of several reasons but what was certain is that the Obama administration knew very well that, military intervention wouldn't solve the problem. This strategy was also avoided because the US was in negotiations with Russia for Syria to commit to the Chemical Weapon Convention and relinquish its chemical weapon arsenal. In respect to the intervention strategy, the US changes its position in Syria after the first allegations of the use of chemical weapons. The Obama administration shifted from providing only humanitarian aid to supporting the opposition rebels with military support. The alleged use of chemical weapons in June and August of 2013 forced the Obama administration to intervene in Syria because the red line was crossed, after these attacks Obama declared that he was seeking approval from congress to carry out limited strikes to deter against the Syrian regime use of chemical weapons.(Finney, 2013, pp. 10–11) But the threat to use military intervention was withdrawn by the Obama administration when the Syrian regime agreed to join the CWC and also give up its chemical weapons program.

There have been three instances where a military response was used towards the use of chemical weapons in Syria. All of the military actions were made against the Assad regime. The first military intervention was taken by the Obama administration, in September 2013, against the Syrian regime for the use of chemical weapons against its people, this military intervention was in form of missiles strikes on military sites of the Syrian government. The other two instances of military interventions were carried out by the Trump administration in retaliation to the alleged use of chemical weapons in 2017 and 2018 respectively.

After the assessment of the alleged attack of chemical weapons on April 4, 2017, in Khan Sheikhoun, concluded that there was a very high level of confidence that the Syrian regime was responsible for the use of chemical weapons in the attack, in response the US launched 59 missiles at the Syrian airfield in Al Shayrat without approval from the U.N Security Council. These missiles were targeted on aircraft shelters, ammunition supply bunkers, radars, air defense system, petroleum and logistical storage. This military action was intended to deter the Syrian regime from the use of chemical weapons.(Schmitt & Ford, 2017)

On April 14, 2018, The United States, United Kingdom and France launched more than a hundred missiles into Syria, in response to the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime forces in Douma. The airstrikes targeted chemical research and storage sites in Syria. The multilateral response to the alleged use of chemical weapons on Khan Shaykhun on April 4, 2017, could be linked to the debate surrounding the chemical weapon taboo and the US construction of the Syrian intervention as a global response. Before the alleged use of chemical weapons in Khan Shaykhun, the Trump administration had little consideration for the chemical weapons taboo, but the missiles strike in Khan Shaykhun changed the situation and Trump claimed to have taken the responsibility to address the violation of the chemical weapons taboo.

Furthermore, Trump did not support Obama's decision in 2013 to intervene in Syria but Trump knew in 2017 that he could use the intervention strategy that was laid by Obama administration, without being blamed by the international community because already there a constructed red line of what the US future foreign policy would be on Syria. In this way, the Trump administration framed its actions in line with the pre-existing rhetoric (Bentley, 2017). One might argue that the intervention in Syria was motivated by the violation of the chemical weapons taboo, but Trump's commitment was purely strategic considering that if the US did not respond to the use of chemical weapons in Syria, it might represent the US as weak in the region.

By applying such response through it will strengthen its position in the region and also its stance on any further attack which involves the use of chemical weapons. In applying the constructivist viewpoint, the analysis has shown that the US have effectively constructed the intervention into Syria as an international concern, one which every state was indebted to react and this was achieved by associating it to the rhetoric of the chemical weapon taboo, by doing so it shaped the understanding of decision-makers of the international community in promoting the US ambitions of multilateral response to the use of chemical weapons in Syria.

## **Conclusion**

This paper aims to explore the strategies that were exploited in response to the use of chemical weapons in Syria. Conclusively, this study has shown several strategies that were employed during the US response to the allegation of chemical weapon in Syria. Despite the Syrian conflict involving dreadful cases of violence, the use of chemical weapons was the trigger to US foreign policy on Syria. Before the employment of chemical weapons, the US was only providing humanitarian aid and could not do much to resolve the problem of human rights violations that the conflict pose on the Syrian people.

In the first instance, the study identified main strategies that were used in the response to the alleged use of chemical weapons in Syria, chemical weapons taboo was found to strategically employ to trigger a response and also construct any response as a commitment to the taboo. The intervention served as both a plan and a response to chemical weapons use, and it was designed to influence a multilateral response against the Syrian government for using chemical weapons on its own citizens. Additionally, the framing strategy was identified as an important part of the US response and it serves as a tool used to assert responsibility of the chemical weapon attack, for any effective response to be taken, a culprit must be asserted first. These strategies served a great deal to influence and shape both national and international support for US foreign policy on Syria.

However, the analysis of this research has demonstrated the view that pre-existing concepts such as weapons of mass destruction and chemical weapons taboo are influential in international relation and these concepts can be strategically applied for specific political purpose, representing to be normative command in international politics, one that is more agency-driven. In the vein, it is argued that these concepts should not just be view through a constructivist model of analysis, but also in the strategic narrative perspective. This framework demonstrates that actor in international relations can deliberately construct and applied specific normative concepts to realize their own interest. Although it is extremely important for the commitment to preventing the use of chemical weapons and weapons of mass destruction, but these normative are political tools open to rhetorical exploitation and manipulations.

In conclusion, the analysis of this research has demonstrated that framing as a great effect in international relations and foreign policy realm and it significantly influences both the considerations and attention of actors, but the strategic use of framing can in depth to produce an anticipated response by constructing a frame of choice in which actors consider. The role that strategic framing plays is the manipulation and persuasion of public opinion in order to force support for particular foreign policy.

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