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## Obama's Syria blinders

*The costs of Obama's Syria policy are apparent to everyone but him*



*A child stands in a makeshift camp near the Greek-Macedonian border, where thousands of migrants are stranded. (Louisa Gouliamaki/Agence France-Presse via Getty Images)*

by [Jackson Diehl](#)

When President Obama chose to sidestep military action in Syria in 2013 and then struck a deal to [dispose of most of the regime's chemical weapons](#), it seemed possible to me that he had stumbled into a tactical victory. After all, the proposed airstrikes, which Secretary of State John F. Kerry promised would be “[unbelievably small](#),” didn't appear likely to achieve much, while the neutralization of the chemical arsenal would remove a major threat to the region.

I changed my mind after I heard from dozens of foreign ministers and other senior officials of U.S. allies as they visited Washington in the months and years that followed. Japanese, South Koreans, Singaporeans and even Indians confided that they were convinced that Obama's failure to use force against the regime of Bashar al-Assad was directly responsible for China's subsequent burst of aggression in territorial disputes in the East China Sea and South China Sea.

Poles, Lithuanians and French drew a line between the backdown and Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine. As for the Sunni Arabs, Turks and Israelis, it is an article of faith that Obama's decision accelerated the catastrophe that Syria, and much of the rest of the Middle East, has become. They have an obvious point: Hundreds of thousands are dead, the European Union is in danger of crumbling under an onslaught of refugees, and the Islamic State and Assad remain unvanquished. Who would not call this a bad outcome?

Obama, it turns out. By far the most startling disclosure in the president's [interviews with the Atlantic's Jeffrey Goldberg](#) is his judgment of his Syria decision: "I'm very proud of this moment," he said. The words ring with defensive arrogance. But they also suggest that Obama remains, to this day, fundamentally clueless — or in denial — about the consequences of what historians will surely regard as one of his most fateful errors.

As Goldberg describes it, the president now regards August 2013 as his "liberation" from a U.S. foreign policy establishment he holds in contempt, along with a "Washington playbook" that demands military action to uphold American "credibility." If that's how Obama sees it, that is a blinkered misjudgment. Yes, the conventional wisdom among the think tanks, ex-officials and pundits of Washington is that Obama made a terrible error. But that is also the view of the foreign policy establishments of most of the rest of the world.

If Indians and Japanese, Poles and Latvians, Israelis and Saudis are convinced that the United States damaged its deterrence and invited aggression — and that they must adjust their own policies accordingly — it almost doesn't matter if Obama is right in insisting that Putin and Xi Jinping took no cues from him. The global conventional wisdom has created its own reality. Recent events have been reinforcing: If the president believes Putin's recent military adventure in Syria had nothing to do with the 2013 decision, he is virtually alone.

In fact, despite his protestations, Obama seems to be haunted by his Syrian retreat — so much so that he has concocted a kind of negative doctrine around it. It is, says Goldberg, that the Middle East "is no longer terribly important to American interests"; that even if it is, there is little the United States can do "to make it a better place"; and that any attempt to do so leads only to war and "the eventual hemorrhaging of U.S. credibility and power."

The first thing to say about this is that if Obama really believes it, he has betrayed himself by [dispatching 4,000 troops](#) and scores of warplanes to Iraq and Syria to fight the Islamic State. That would seem to establish that there remains a vital U.S. interest in the region and that U.S. military action can have a positive effect. It suggests the real question is not about whether the United States should engage in the Middle East, or even if it must do so militarily, but rather how much so and with what goals.

In that, Obama has fallen victim to his own ideology. As the Brookings Institution's Tamara Wittes points out in [a brilliant Atlantic essay](#), the president's attempt to restrain U.S. involvement in the Middle East has had the paradoxical effect of sucking the country into a deeper morass. Obama, she says, not only refused to act against Assad but also abandoned U.S. efforts to help build a new political order in Iraq, Egypt and Libya.

The result is that Obama is now obliged to fight the Islamic State's multiplying iterations across the region without any prospect of viable states to replace it. He has few allies and no exit strategy. The "liberation" from the Middle East that he now celebrates has created a quagmire that the next president will inherit.

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