

Barack Obama's response towards the Syrian civil war

How Barack Obama's policy towards the poisonous gas attack of August 21st,
2013, in Syria can be explained.



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Table of contents

| | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Introduction | 3 |
| 1. Theoretical Framework | 7 |
| 1.1 Motive..... | 7 |
| 1.2 Theory..... | 7 |
| 1.3 Remarks..... | 10 |
| 2. Postures and Posture Changes in the first framing contest | 11 |
| 2.1 Barack Obama..... | 12 |
| 2.2 John McCain & Lindsey Graham..... | 14 |
| 2.3 Ted Cruz & Rand Paul..... | 15 |
| 2.4 Conclusions..... | 17 |
| 3. The Policy Game | 17 |
| 3.1 Start of the policy game..... | 17 |
| 3.2 Barack Obama..... | 18 |
| 3.3 John McCain & Lindsey Graham..... | 19 |
| 3.4 Ted Cruz & Rand Paul..... | 20 |
| 3.5 Conclusions..... | 20 |
| 4. Outcome of the Policy Game and Consequences | 21 |
| 4.1 Acknowledgement & most likely outcome..... | 21 |
| 4.2 Obama as Status Quo player..... | 22 |
| 4.3 Obama as Change Advocate..... | 22 |
| 4.4 Obama’s Policy Paradigm Shift..... | 23 |
| 4.5 Consequences..... | 24 |
| 4.6 Conclusions..... | 25 |
| 5. Conclusion | 26 |
| 6. Appendix | 28 |
| 7. Bibliography | 30 |
| 7.1 Primary Sources..... | 30 |
| 7.2 Secondary Sources..... | 32 |

Introduction

‘All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights’. This is article 1 from the Universal Declaration of Human rights, and although looking self-evident, it has been infringed many times. Over the past decades, numerous cases of Human Rights Violations (HRV) shocked the world and brought up challenges for international governance. Wanting to respond to these violations, international actors such as governments, NGO’s and international organizations (UN) soon found that numerous participants, different agendas, and cultural, economic and historical constraints make it difficult to generate a unified, justified and correct response. Examples hereof have occurred during the late Syrian Civil war which started on the 15th of March 2011. Since the start of the uprising, nearly 130.000 people have died.¹ During the Syrian civil war, the Bashar al-Assad led regime was accused by the United States of having committed human rights violations, of which the poisonous gas attack on the 21st of August 2013 was the most visible. Although the body count is disputable, numbers circle around at least 3600 victims, of which 355 have died in hospitals.² In the aftermath of the gas attack, the United States was quick to condemn the event. In the process of creating a response that followed this condemnation, several factors, domestic and international, influenced the projected policy outcome.³ Therefore, the poisonous gas attack on August 21st 2013 in Syria makes the Syrian civil war useful for the case study as described below.

Since 9/11 the United States’ basic ideal was that it represented some sort of Global Cop with the responsibility to look after the world, make sure that international norms stayed intact, and that everyone complied to international law (Bush, 2002).⁴ In addition, post-9/11 politics were characterized by a more aggressive American foreign policy. However, when these post-9/11 politics became symbolized by the Afghan and Iraqi war as a failure, they soon lost in popularity. When Barack Obama came to office he stated that he wanted to end wars in the Muslim world and reduce American military influence in the Middle-East (Obama, 2013; Obama, 2009). Senior officials said that Obama aims to be “present but not deeply involved” around the globe (Lexington, 2012). Although empirical observations prove

¹ Numbers are contested, see: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/12/02/us-syria-crisis-toll-idUSBRE9B10ES20131202>

² Numbers are contested, see: <http://www.msf.org/article/syria-thousands-suffering-neurotoxic-symptoms-treated-hospitals-supported-msf>

³ ***The projected policy outcome was based on the outcome of the Congressional vote on military intervention, as described later.***

⁴ In bibliography as: *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America.*

that the United States increased the use of drones in the Middle-East, Obama tried to set a tone of detachment. He tried to move America from being an indispensable nation to an indispensable catalyst: again, present, but not deeply involved (The Economist, 2013).

The Syrian civil war proved to be a difficult case for Obama. As various alleged cases of human rights violations were waiting for an international response, Obama received critique from political opponents for not responding. In order to cope with this critique Obama set a clear red line during his 'red line speech' on August 20th 2012, stating that if the Syrian regime or the rebels were to cross his 'red line', that would change his calculus (BO 1). This red line entailed the use of chemical weapons. When the Syrian regime allegedly used chemical weapons, Obama tried to win support for a military intervention. This change from a non-intervention idea to a military intervention idea was accompanied by a lot of critique from the political opposition. In the wake of the poisonous gas attack of August 21st, 2013, in Syria, an old aspect of American politics resurfaced: *partisan conflict*. This aspect is based on the idea that an everlasting political joust between the main public office holders and their political opponents influences domestic and foreign policy significantly (Orentlicher, 2013). By using certain frames, both parties try to win the support of their domestic public and damage the reputation of their opponents (Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell, 2009). These so called *framing contests* are part of the partisan conflict and can have big consequences on the American political process, thereby influencing American foreign policy (Orentlicher, 2013). Given that human rights violations are likely to be condemned by American foreign policy, it then becomes necessary to investigate the influence of these so called *Framing Contests* on American foreign policy because America is often seen as the global cop in human rights matters. The research will do this by answering the following question: *Given that human rights violations call for an international response, how can the reaction of Barack Obama in the case of human rights violations in Syria since the start of the civil war be explained by using the theory of framing contests?*

David Orentlicher (2013, pp. 105) states that partisan conflict does have real consequences and that it can lead to gridlock within Congress and between Congress and the president. Such gridlock can cause troubles within the policy making process, which in turn contributes to an already unwieldy American political system. This became apparent in the aftermath of the poisonous gas attacks on the 21st of August 2013 in Syria when Obama struggled to create a

unified American response.⁵ At the time of writing, the Syrian civil war is still raging on without real consequences for the Bashar al-Assad led regime, except for the fact that the regime had to cooperate with the removal and destruction of its chemical weapons arsenal as proposed by the Russians.⁶ By investigating the influence of partisan conflict in the form of framing contests the research will contribute to a better and more comprehensive understanding of political responses towards external events such as human rights violations. This is important because it can heavily influence politics, creating responses which are not based merely on helping the victims of human rights violations but also on winning support from their own domestic public.⁷

This aspect, although looking obvious, has not yet been subject to a lot of academic attention. Therefore, the research will contribute to the academic debate by testing the theory on a recent and well-documented case study. It will create ground for further research to the process of creating a response in the American political system by focusing on an influential aspect of the system itself. The case study as such has both social and theoretical relevance.

The analytical framework is based on two aspects of framing theory, namely the (1) crisis exploitation theory and (2) the theory of framing contests. Both theories are well suited to theoretically explain the significant features of this case study in order to answer the research question. The crisis exploitation theory can be seen as ‘the purposeful utilization of crisis-type rhetoric to significantly alter levels of political support for public office holders and public policies’ (Boin, ‘t Hart, and McConnell, 2009, pp. 83). The theory of framing contests makes use of the crisis exploitation theory by stating that crises create political opportunity which gives rise to framing contests between supporters of status-quo and advocates of change (Boin, ‘t Hart, and McConnell, 2009). In short, in the aftermath of a crisis, a continuous battle between the frames of public office holders and political opponents takes place which can significantly alter the initial actions of public office holders.

The thesis as presented here conducts a Single-Case Study Research as described by Robert K. Yin (2003). I chose this method because the theory can fully come to its own this way. The

⁵ The United States did not accomplish a unified response and politicians were and are still divided about the matter. It was the Russian proposal of Syrian chemical disarmament that provided the international response.

⁶ For content of the Russian disarmament proposal see: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/09/us-russian-proposal-syria-chemical-weapons>

⁷ Thereby going against Alexander Wendt’s theory of constructivism which states that states do not merely act out of self-interest but out of a contest of shared ideas. See bibliography (Wendt, 199)

analytical tool presented in the theory can be enhanced if it is used in an in-depth single case study by tracking shifts in actors' stances (Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell, 2009, pp. 91). I will focus on claims with a convincing nature of actors' own policy ideas and their predicted outcomes. I identified these frames by undertaking documented research as well as audio research of speeches and media statements by the subject actors. The unit of analysis will consist of Barack Obama, John McCain, Lindsey Graham, Ted Cruz and Rand Paul. These actors represent the core political parties of the American political system.

The analytical framework will be presented in the first chapter. I will provide a comprehensive overview of the theory which the research will use to make sense of the empirical evidence and I will focus on two concepts of these theories. In Chapter Two, the research will focus at the first framing contest which centers around the significance of an event for the subject community.⁸ First, a short introduction in the case study will be given in which the poisonous gas attack of August 21st, 2013, will be analyzed. Second, postures and posture changes will be explained by using the first framing contest as described by Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell. The central question in this chapter will be as follows: *How can possible differences in framing from core actors within the American political system with regard to human rights violations in Syria be defined by the first framing contest?* In Chapter Three the research will focus on the consequences of the first framing contest on the 'policy game', as described by Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell (2009). This chapter will function as steppingstone for chapter four by answering the following question: *What is the influence of these postures and posture changes on the positioning of the actors in the policy game?* In Chapter Four, the research deals with the outcomes of the policy game and the possible consequences they could have on the response of Barack Obama. *How does the outcome of the policy game influence the response of Barack Obama and what are the consequences hereof?* In the last chapter I will conclude the research by summing up the answers of the sub-questions thereby creating a three-step answer to the main research question.

⁸ See theoretical framework for further information.

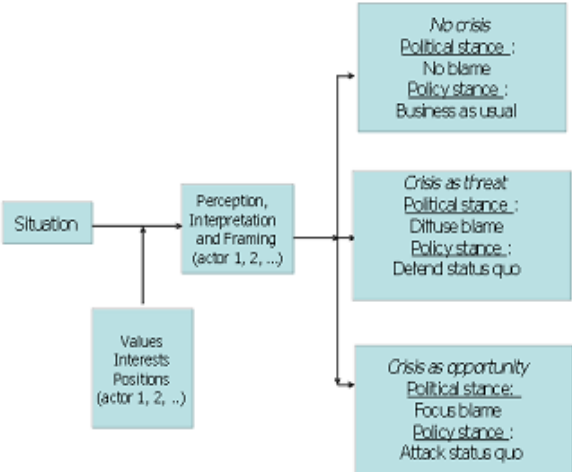
Chapter one: Theoretical framework

The research will use the concept of partisan conflict in the US as an overarching theme for the theoretical framework. Partisan conflict can be seen as a conflict between various partisan actors in the same political environment which can cause gridlock in the decision making process because those actors will only act in a way which is best for their own party (Orentlicher, 2013, pp. 105). This gridlock can make the system less useful and ineffective. David Orentlicher (2013, pp. 105) states that this can have serious consequences for legislation efforts. The research will focus on Barack Obama, two moderate Republican Senators (John McCain and Lindsey Graham) and two conservative, Tea Party aligned, Senators (Ted Cruz and Rand Paul) because those actors represent the core parties of the American political system.

Framing contests are often part of partisan conflict and are usually intensified in the wake of a crisis. Here, crisis can create political opportunity because they disrupt the 'business as usual' governance. An international crisis event such as a human rights violation is usually a fertile ground for discussions and new decision-making processes. In the wake of human rights violations, those actors which are part of the partisan conflict will try to respond to the events in such a way as to promote their own reputation and credibility and damage that of their opponents. When actors try to exploit the outcome of the framing contest in the wake of a crisis the process can be called *crisis exploitation*. The crisis exploitation theory is 'the purposeful utilization of crisis-type rhetoric to significantly alter levels of political support for public office holders and public policies (Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell, 2009, pp. 83). Boin, 't Hart, and McConnel (2009, pp. 84) state that the potential impact on political office-holders and public policy of a crisis is not determined by the events on the ground but by their public perception and interpretation. In short, it is not the events on the ground but the outcome of the framing contest that determines the consequences and response. In this process, political office-holders can adopt three different postures: denial, crisis as threat, and crisis as opportunity. First, denial is pretending like there is no crisis at all and actors try to downplay the idea that there is a problem. Second, actors can frame the *crisis as a critical threat* to the status quo. They will most likely defend the agents (incumbent office-holders) and tools (existing policies) of the status quo against criticism (Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell, 2009, pp. 84). Third, actors can see the *crisis as an opportunity*, 'to expose deficiencies in the status quo ex ante (Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell, 2009, pp. 85). They will try to blame status quo agents

and policies, and will try to win support for their own goals. See figure 1 (Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell, 2009, pp. 84).

Figure 1: Crises as framing contests



Two types of framing contests are at play in the wake of any crisis. The first framing contest centers around the significance of an event. Is it within or without the zone of indifference? This contest determines the agenda status of the issue; do we need to deal with it right now or can we deny it completely? The second framing contest can take place when denial is no longer an option. It focusses on causality. Boin, 't Hart, and McConnel (2009, pp. 87) state that two main dependent variables of this theory are at stake in the causality contest: “the political fortunes of office-holders and the future of the currently existing set of policies, programs and organizations in the domain in which the crisis has materialized.” For the scope of the research however, I will merely focus on the first framing contest surrounding the significance of an event.

Within these framing contests proponents of conflicting frames will try to ensure that their frame prevails and becomes widely accepted by public opinion in order to win political support. It is therefore useful to focus not only on the emergence of these frames but also on the political and policy consequences following their clash (Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell, 2009, pp. 88). In order to do this, Boin, 't Hart, and McConnel (2009, pp. 88) distinguish between two spheres of crisis exploitation: the *political game*, which focuses on the outcomes

of the contest between government and its opposition, and the *policy game*, which focuses on the outcomes of the clash between proponents of the status quo and advocates for change within the policy sphere. For the scope of this research, I will focus on the policy game because the empirical evidence is more clear than for the political game.

The *policy game* deals with the possible changing of status quo policy. Advocates for change of this status quo policy have to decide whether it was insufficient in dealing with the crisis and therefore needs to be changed. Status quo office holders on the other hand have to decide whether they resist any policy change or make an accommodating gesture. Peter Hall (1993) argues that it is more likely that status quo policy makers make such a gesture in the area of instrumental and technical, so called ‘non-core’ aspects of policy instead of in their core beliefs. The outcomes of the contests in the policy game can be found in figure 2 (Boin, ‘t Hart, and McConnell, 2009, pp. 90):

Figure 2. Crisis exploitation (II): The policy game

| | | |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Change advocates | Press for policy paradigm shift | Press for incremental reform |
| Status-quo Players | | |
| Resist policy change | I: Policy stalemate or politically imposed shift | II: Policy stalemate or politically imposed incremental adjustment |
| Contain policy change | III: Major and shift rhetorical/symbolic change; more incremental substantive change | IV: Negotiated incremental adjustment |

Boin, ‘t Hart, and McConnell (2009, pp. 91) state that the policy crisis exploitation game models’ versatility as an analytical tool can be enhanced if one uses it in a dynamic fashion in an in-depth case study by tracking shifts in key actors’ stances as new events take place during a crisis. This is exactly what the research shall be doing.

Finally, Boin, ‘t Hart, and McConnell (2009, pp. 95) distinguish between four factors which may have shaped the crisis exploitation game and thus the framing contest. Two arenas, the mass media and official inquiries, and two factors, the situational and contextual factors,

influence the framing contest. For the scope of this BA thesis, the research will focus on the role of mass media, which plays a crucial role in the wake of any crisis (Seeger, 2003). Two rival interpretations on the role of mass media can be distinguished. First, the degree to which the media's crisis reporting and commentary align with the frames put forward by a particular political actor depends upon the credibility of that actor's crisis communication (Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell, 2009, pp. 96). This credibility is determined by the media performance of an actor, of which an example will be dealt with later. The second interpretation states that mass media tries to be independent by putting forward pre-existing frames. Actors then try to fit their frames with these pre-existing biases. (Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell, 2009, pp. 96). In this interpretation, the role of mass media can make or break political actors by emphasizing exogenous or endogenous interpretations and blaming internal or external actors for the crisis.

Three last remarks about the analytical framework need to be mentioned. The first is that we need to keep in mind that office-holders will not automatically be status quo players and that political opponents are advocates of change (Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell, 2009). For example, George W. Bush became the biggest advocate of change after 9/11, enacting several new laws and establishing a completely new Department.⁹ When the research looks at the empirical evidence on the Syrian civil war, similar features can become clear. The second remark is that framing theory itself is very broad. The scope of this research demanded a specification into two aspects within two intertwined theories. These theories do not look at framing in general but at framing as a response to crisis. By focusing on the first framing contest and its consequences on the policy game, the research will have a scope small enough for this BA thesis but without degrading the values of the theories. The last remark is that I chose this theory because I found empirical evidence for its existence which makes it applicable in this case study. For example, during Barack Obama's speech on 10 September he stated the following:

To my friends on the right, I ask you to reconcile your commitment to America's military might with the failure to act when a cause is so plainly just. To my friends on the left, I ask you to reconcile your belief in freedom and dignity for all people with these images of children thriving in pain and going still on a cold hospital floor (BO 2).

⁹ The Department of Homeland Security, see: <http://www.dhs.gov/creation-department-homeland-security>

Several weeks later, Senator John McCain spoke about the ‘selling’ of the plan to congress and the fact that Obama was looking forward to a very tough sell (JM 1). Obama was part of a contests of frames, in which he needed to ‘sell’ his frame as the dominant one, making this case an example of the theory as described above.

Chapter two

How can possible differences in framing from core actors within the American political system with regard to human rights violations in Syria be defined by the first framing contest?

Boin, ‘t Hart, and McConnell (2009, pp. 85) differentiate in the first framing contest between four possible frames: big and bad, bad but not really big, only big but not really bad, or neither big nor bad. Big and bad frames describe the event as catastrophic and as a danger to the subject community, for example the start of a new civil war. Bad but not really big frames are more focused towards one aspect of the community. In many cases, a large part of the subject community will not even know how bad the events exactly were. An example is the nuclear industry’s view of the nuclear waste problem. Big but not really bad frames are less urgent because, although they are big, they do not have significant consequences on the short run to deal with them immediately. Finally, frames can describe events as being neither big nor bad and as such having no consequences for the community. Most likely, events will be ignored or they shall be dealt with in routine.

In figure 1 in the theoretical framework, three different postures were distinguished: denial, crisis as threat, and crisis as opportunity. Proponents of the first posture, denial, will seek to minimize the significance of an event. Actors will most likely try to downplay the idea that the event should have any political or policy consequences (Boin, ‘t Hart, and McConnell, 2009, pp. 84). Proponents of the second posture, crisis as threat, see the events as a challenge to the status quo politics and policies. They will try to defend the status quo against critics and advocates for change. Most likely, they will acknowledge the significance of an event without deeming it to be of great importance to the subject community. Proponents of the third posture, crisis as opportunity, see the events as an opportunity to change status quo politics and policies. They will most likely pinpoint dysfunctional policies and organizations to mobilize support for their substantive alteration (Boin, ‘t Hart, and McConnell, 2009, pp. 85). In doing so they will maximize the significance of an event.

On the 21st of August 2013, at 02:45, reports came in from neighboring areas of Damascus stating that some sort of chemical agents were deployed. Soon after, thousands of videos were uploaded on the internet with victims showing symptoms of being poisoned. After several hours, it became easily believable that the towns of Irbin, Zamalka, Ein Tarma, and Jobar in East-Damascus and the town of Muadhmiya in West-Damascus were subject to some sort of poisonous gas attack. Recently, the UN filed its report stating that chemical weapons were indeed used on the 21st of August 2013, making it an official affair. While the perpetrator of these attacks is still unclear, major Western powers such as the US claimed to have evidence that the Bashar al-Assad led regime was responsible for this cruel act (BO 2). In the aftermath of this poisonous gas attack, Barack Obama was quick to frame the event as being big and bad for the community. On the 31st of August 2013, just ten days after the attack, Obama gave a speech in which he stated the following:

Ten days ago, the world watched in horror, as men, women and children were massacred in Syria, in the worst chemical weapons attack of the 21st century.... This attack is an assault on human dignity. It also presents a great danger to our national security. It risks making a mockery of the global prohibition on the use of chemical weapons. It endangers our friends and our partners along Syria's borders, including Israel, Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon and Iraq. It could lead to escalating use of chemical weapons, or their proliferation to terrorist groups who would do our people harm. In a world with many dangers, this menace must be confronted
(BO 2).

In his speech Obama defines the events as being a threat to national security and to the people of his community. In doing so, he maximizes the significance of the event in order to gain support for his plans to intervene in the Syrian civil war, making him a proponent of the third posture. Obama was however not always in favor of an intervention. For example, on August 18th, 2011, Obama stated the following:

The future of Syria will be determined by the Syrian people, and the international community must come together in support of their legitimate aspirations... We have consistently said that President Assad must lead a democratic transition or get out of the way. He has not led. For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside. The United States cannot and will not impose this transition upon Syria. It is up to the Syrian

people to choose their own leaders, and we have heard their strong desire that there not be foreign intervention in their movement (Philips, 2011).

It appears that the poisonous gas attack was some sort of tipping point for Obama to change his calculus. He hereby lived up to the promise he made in his red line speech on August 20th, 2012, in which he stated that a red line is crossed when ‘we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons being move around or being utilized’ and that ‘there will be enormous consequences if we start seeing movement on the chemical weapons front’ (BO 1). However, this attack was not the first of its kind. In June 2013, a month before the here discussed gas attack, U.S. intelligence concluded that Assad’s forces had already used such weapons, killing nearly 150 people in the process (Rhodes, 2013). Why then did Obama frame the gas attack on August 21st, 2013 as big and bad, and did he nearly deny the earlier gas attacks?

According to the literature on crisis communication, lying, understating or denying obvious problems, and promising relief without delivering can undermine an actor’s credibility (Boin, ‘t Hart, and McConnell, 2009, pp. 96). Herein lies the difference between the response of the Obama administration towards the two alleged gas attacks. Whereas the first gas attacks were far from obvious and on a relative small scale, the attack on August 21st, 2013, was immediately broadcasted all over the world in thousands of footages.¹⁰ This made it impossible for Obama to deny the event; he had to respond. In doing so, Obama had to change his posture. Where he first was a proponent of the second posture, acknowledgement, he now became a proponent of the third posture, crisis as opportunity. However, the literature suggests that actors choose their posture out of free will and thereby it neglects possible promises they made. With his ‘red line’ speech, Barack Obama promised relief if the civil war were to be subject to chemical weapons. By making this promise, Obama obliged himself to act in order to retain his credibility. This, because damaging America’s credibility has profound implications, as Obama said so himself in his speech on August 31st, 2013:

Make no mistake, this has implications beyond chemical warfare. If we won’t enforce accountability in the face of this heinous act, what is to say about our resolve to stand up to others who do not follow international fundamental rules. To governments who would choose to build nuclear arms. To terrorists who would spread biological weapons. To armies who

¹⁰ See for example: Youtube. (2013). *Poison Gas Attack In Syria [GRAPHIC]*. [Online Video]. 21 August. Available from: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oGNT3f02XsE>. [Accessed: 23 December 2013]. Warning: Graphic images.

carry out genocide. We cannot raise our children in a world where we will not follow through on the things we say, the accords we sign, the values that define us... We cannot, and must not, turn a blind eye to what happened in Damascus (BO 3).

For the scope of this research, Obama's political opposition will be divided into two parties: moderate Republicans and Conservative Tea Party members.¹¹ Senator John McCain and Senator Lindsey Graham, both moderate Republicans, were among the first to condemn the Syrian civil war and call for more international attention to the situation. In addition, both Senators were also in favor of a more aggressive approach, entailing humanitarian as well as military aid (McCain, 2012). John McCain stated on June 18th, 2012, that 'we should refuse to give Russia and China a veto over our actions, and instead work outside of the Security Council to shape a coalition of willing states with a legitimate mandate to intervene militarily in Syria' (McCain, 2012). His aggressive approach was supported by Lindsey Graham who stated already in June 2011 that we need to 'put everything on the table, including military force' (LG 1). Both senators were trying to get more involved since the start of the war, thereby trying to change the existing 'hands-off' approach and non-intervention policy. They have both framed the Syrian civil war since the beginning as being big and bad, a frame which was intensified after reports came in from poisonous gas attacks. Both Senators emphasized the importance of these gas attacks and their impact on the US' credibility. McCain stated the following:

If Congress were to reject a resolution like this, after the president of the United States has already committed to action, the consequences would be catastrophic in that the credibility of this country with friends and enemy and adversaries alike would be, would be shredded and there would not only be implications for this presidency but for future presidencies as well (JMLG 1).

Graham too, recognized and emphasized the importance of this event and the consequences it could have by stating the following: "I would act... Cause if he doesn't, his credibility as a world leader is completely shot. You can't address the world and talk to your enemies and your friends in the tone he did and do nothing (LG 2)."

¹¹ Here, Moderate Republicans are defined as Republicans who do not belong to the Tea Party.

McCain and Graham are clear proponents of the third posture and see this crisis as an opportunity to change status quo policy. They both pinpoint Obama's dysfunctional policy, his actions, statements, and handling of the problem in order to mobilize support to alter the decision making process in their favor. In doing so they maximize the significance of the event and frame it as being very big and very bad for their subject community.

Senator Ted Cruz and Senator Rand Paul, both members of the conservative Tea Party, have disagreed with Obama and the moderate Republicans how to respond to the crisis since the start of the civil war. The conservative Tea Party emerged during the 2010 elections and proved to be a new force in American politics.¹² The movement is characterized by trying to limit the size of the government, reduce governmental spending, opposing tax increases and avoid military involvement in matters which are no direct threat to the national security of the US.¹³ This last aspect is especially visible in the Syrian civil war. Rand Paul stated that American involvement in the matter was a big mistake and not in American interest (RP 1). Ted Cruz expressed similar views by stating the following:

I do agree there is a lot to be outraged about. Number one, all of us are outraged at Assad's conduct.. but a military strike is a mistake for two reasons: one, because I think the administration is proceeding with the wrong objective, and two, because they have no viable plan for success... This attack is not based on defending US national security (TC 1).

Both Senators can be seen as proponents of the second posture, crisis as threat. They view the entire crisis, and especially the alleged human rights violations it entails, as a threat to the status quo policy they both support. This status quo policy was that America should not get involved militarily in the Syrian civil war (Philips, 2011). They frame the crisis as big but not very bad, thus implying that although the crisis is big, it has almost no implications for America. Hereby they acknowledge the magnitude of the crisis but diminish its importance for their subject community. In doing so, both Senators reduce the influence of the crisis on the credibility of Obama. Rand Paul stated the following in reaction to Obama's September 10th speech on Syria:

¹² Tea Party members are accused of the Government Shutdown in 2013, see <http://www.wjla.com/articles/2013/10/establishment-republicans-blame-tea-party-for-shutdown-fallout-95568.html> for more information.

¹³ See Steve Eichler. 2004. *About Us*. [ONLINE] Available at: <http://www.teaparty.org/about-us/>. [Accessed 06 January 14] for all 15 core beliefs of the Tea Party Movement.

Some argue that American credibility is on the line. That because president Obama drew a red line with chemical weapons, America must act or lose credibility. I would argue that America’s credibility does not reside in one man. If our enemies wish to know if America will defend herself, let them look no further than our response to 9/11 (RP 1).

Paul goes even further by stating that America should never go to war unless vital US interests are on the line: “We do have to fight on occasion, but when we fight, we should fight to win, we should fight for an American cause (RP 2)”. “I think the line in the sand should be that America gets involved when American interests are threatened. I don’t see American interests involved on either side of the Syrian war (RP 3).” Both Senators made countless statements of this nature over the past two years, without changing their objective. The alleged poisonous gas attack did not change their calculus and they remained reluctant to intervene.

Figure 3 will show all the actors’ postures before and after the poisonous gas attacks on August 21st, 2013:

Figure 3: Change in postures.

| <i>Postures</i> | First posture (denial) | Second posture (crisis as threat to status quo policy) | Third posture (crisis as opportunity to change status quo policy) |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Actors</i> | | | |
| Barack Obama | | Before gas attack | After gas attack |
| Moderate Republicans | | | Before and after gas attack |
| Tea Party members | | Before and after gas attack | |

(Drafted myself, based postures on Boin, ‘t Hart, and McConnell, 2009)

The above figure clearly shows that Barack Obama is the only investigated actor who changed his posture. In the earlier described media arena, a professional media performance enhances an actor’s credibility. Denying obvious problems undermines this professional

media performance and as a consequence weakens an actor's credibility. The thousands of footages of the poisonous gas attacks on August 21st, 2013, in Syria, were too obvious to ignore, leaving Obama with no choice but to respond. In addition, by promising relief without delivering, Obama could have seriously damaged America's credibility which, as he stated as showed above, could have catastrophic consequences in that damaging America's credibility would have profound implications. Obama's posture change can thus be explained by his media response towards the Syrian civil war in which he promised relief if the country fell victim to poisonous gas attacks.

Chapter three

What is the influence of these postures and posture changes on the positioning of the actors in the policy game?

When Barack Obama became a proponent of the third posture, he tried to push for a military intervention, thereby coinciding with Moderate Republicans such as John McCain and Lindsey Graham, who were in favor of more involvement since the start of the conflict. Obama could have followed in the footsteps of George W. Bush by instigating a military intervention without congressional approval. However, with the knowledge that these interventions turned out disastrously, Obama stated that, although he possessed the authority to order a military strike, he believed it was right to take such a debate to congress: "... So even though I possess the authority to order military strikes, I believe it was right, in the absence of a direct or imminent threat to our security, to take this debate to Congress (BO 2)." By taking the debate surrounding a possible military intervention in Syria to Congress, Obama gained appreciation from his colleagues in the opposition. Rand Paul was, although opposing Obama's new posture, one of the first to 'thank' the president for his decision to take the debate to congress by stating the following: "Well the one thing that I would say is that I am proud of the president for that he's coming to Congress in a constitutional manner and asking for an authorization (RP 3)." A possible reason why the opposition was thankful for this decision could be because now they would really have a say in the decision making process. Obama's action made it possible for the by Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell described policy crisis exploitation game to take place (2009). The policy crisis exploitation game takes place in the aftermath of a crisis and its outcome determines future actions. Figure 4 shows the possible outcomes in the policy game (Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell, 2009, pp. 90):

Figure 4: Crisis exploitation (II): The policy game

| | | |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Change advocates | Press for policy paradigm shift | Press for incremental reform |
| Status-quo Players | | |
| Resist policy change | I: Policy stalemate or politically imposed shift | II: Policy stalemate or politically imposed incremental adjustment |
| Contain policy change | III: Major and rhetorical/symbolic change; more incremental substantive change | IV: Negotiated incremental adjustment |

Before the poisonous gas attack on August 21st, 2013, the sides were divided differently than after the gas attack. Most interesting is the change Obama has gone through. When Obama decided in 2012 to provide aid to the rebels, he opposed his own non-intervention policy in Syria, as described earlier.¹⁴ In doing so he became some sort of a change advocate, pressing slightly for incremental reform in the form of humanitarian aid. However, some might argue that Obama did not press for incremental reform against his Syrian policy, but simply lived up to the core aspects of his foreign policy in general.¹⁵ By providing humanitarian aid, he tried to make accommodating gestures to advocates of change who longed for more intervention. When looking at the situation like this, Obama seems to be a status quo player who tried to contain policy change by making accommodating gestures. Both positions will be discussed later into more depth and one position will come forth as the dominant one when the research focusses on the outcomes in the policy game.

After the poisonous gas attack on August 21st, 2013, Obama's posture changed drastically. As described earlier, Obama had to live up to the promises he made in his red line speech, changing him from a status quo player who tried to contain policy change, or a change advocate who pressed for incremental reform, to a change advocate who pressed for a

¹⁴ See for example <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2013/01/29/president-obama-announces-additional-humanitarian-aid-syrian-people> on how much aid the US had given before August 21, 2013.

¹⁵ "We will support democracy from Asia to Africa, from the Americas to the Middle East, because our interests and our conscience compel us to act on behalf of those who long for freedom." From: http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/president-obamas-second-inaugural-address-transcript/2013/01/21/f148d234-63d6-11e2-85f5-a8a9228e55e7_story.html

policy paradigm shift. “The issues are too big for business as usual (BO 3).” In doing so, Obama coincided with moderate Republicans such as John McCain and Lindsey Graham, who tried to press for a policy paradigm shift long before August 21st, 2013.

John McCain and Lindsey Graham were long in favor of a more aggressive approach toward the Syrian civil war. John McCain stated for example on February 20th, 2013, that there should be ‘no option left off the table’ (JMLG 2). “I would remind you that we intervened in Bosnia and Kosovo because massacres were taking place. A massacre is taking place in Syria today, and all options need to be on the table (JMLG 2).” Lindsey Graham stated the following: “I do believe it is in our national security interest to get Assad out. The idea of trying to arm the opposition forces needs to be considered, very much considered (JMLG 2).” Aid was however not the only thing McCain and Graham asked for. On March 5th, 2012, John McCain called for air strikes on Syrian government forces:

Providing military assistance to the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and other opposition groups, is necessary. But at this late hour, that alone, will not be sufficient to stop the slaughter and safe innocent lives. The only realistic way to do so is with foreign air power (JM 3).

These were radical ideas for that moment and were directly opposing status quo policy, defining McCain and Graham as change advocates who pressed for a policy paradigm shift.

In the aftermath of the poisonous gas attacks on August 21st, 2013, both Senators were quick to blame the Assad regime and coincide with Obama’s proposed policy change, thereby intensifying their position as change advocates who were pressing for a paradigm shift. However, they were both pressing for a more thorough and clear response, as was made clear on September 2nd, 2013:

As to the limited military strike, John and I would both would like to see a more sustained military effort, but we understand where the president is at on that issue but it is my hope that even a limited military strike can degrade Assad’s ability to project force, particularly using chemical weapons... A weak response is almost as bad as doing nothing(JMLG 3).

Rand Paul and Ted Cruz, being proponents of the second posture, resisted policy change since the beginning of the conflict. On May 28th, 2013 Rand Paul stated that America should not be involved and should not change its policy towards Syria: “I think it’s not a good idea to get involved in Syria (RP 4).” The politics of the moment were characterized by the

idea that the Syrian people had to change their own future, without any American intervention, making this statement supportive of the status quo policy of the moment. Even further, Cruz and Paul were resisting any policy change at all, as became apparent when Cruz stated the following on June 20th, 2013:

Don't give weapons to people who hate us! Don't give weapons to people who want to kill us! US foreign policy should be directed at one single purpose: protecting the vital national security interests of the United States. Arming potential al-Qaeda rebels is not furthering those interests (TC2).

Any American influence, military or humanitarian, intervention or aid, was opposed by Cruz and Paul, making them status quo players who resisted any policy change.

After the poisonous gas attack on August 21st, 2013, Cruz and Paul still resisted any form of policy change. Paul tried to diminish the impact it would have on US credibility, by stating that 'US credibility does not reside in one man' and 'if enemies want to see if the US is still able to defend herself they just have to look at 9/11' (RP 1). In addition, Paul stated that it is stupid to follow up one bad idea with the other:

I think it would show that he made a grave mistake when he drew a red line, I think a president should be very careful about setting red lines he's not going to keep, but then again, when you set a red line that was not a good idea to begin with, and now you're going to adhere to or to try to show your machismo. I think then you're trying to save face and really adding bad policy to bad policy (RP 3)

Although Obama changed from a status quo player to a change advocate, Cruz and Paul remained strongly opposed to any policy change. In doing so they became the voice of opponents of Obama's new plans towards the Syrian civil war. With the debate surrounding the newly proposed policy coming before Congress, Cruz and Paul were able to try and block legislature. Now, while every actor had chosen a side, partisan interests in the framing contests were most influential and crisis exploitation attempts could really take shape, influencing the outcome of the policy game.

Chapter four

How does the outcome of the policy game influence the response of Barack Obama and what are the consequences hereof?

The shift in Obama's posture as well as in his stance towards the policy he set forth in the beginning of the Syrian civil war, as a result towards new events can be identified as drastic. His different stance influences the political process and the possible outcome in the policy game. Let us first analyze what really happened in the policy sphere in the aftermath of the poisonous gas attack on August 21st, 2013.

In the days following the poisonous gas attack, world leaders were quick to condemn the use of chemical weapons. As described earlier, the US was quick to blame the Assad led regime and began early with their threats of a possible military intervention. In the aftermath of the attack, the policy game started to take shape and the world watched as Obama displayed his ideas before Congress. The outcome of the Congressional vote however never came because Russia proposed a diplomatic solution. It would use its diplomatic ties with the Assad regime to come to an accord in which Syria promised to give up all its chemical weapons equipment to an international force for destruction. The Russian disarmament proposal was embraced by the international environment, leaving the outcome of the Congressional vote forever in the dark. Therefore, the research will make use of estimates and will look at the empirical evidence for the most likely empirical outcome. It is important that this is acknowledged because the research cannot work with incomplete evidence and it will not pretend to know the true outcome. This uncertainty on what would have happened leaves space for the theory to try and predict what would have happened theoretically.

In the process of defining the most likely outcome of the vote, the research draws on surveys from Talkingpointsmemo (TPM), CNN, and Mother Jones. According to TPM (2013), at the time of surveying, 47 members of the house would vote yes, 152 had not decided yet, and 233 would vote no.¹⁶ According to CNN (2013), 25 members would vote yes, 6 were unknown, 223 had not decided and 179 would vote no. According to Mother Jones (2013), 100 member would vote no, 143 were leaning towards no, 151 were undecided, 19 were leaning towards yes, and 20 would vote yes. In short, all three surveys incline that a 'no' vote

¹⁶ See also <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/pub?key=0AoY4UgDGYTBQdFUxRzdTNkI4TEZVR3VmNk4ydXY5SWc&gid=1> for complete source information.

is a lot more likely than a ‘yes’ vote. For the scope of the research, I will therefore assume that would the vote have gone to Congress, the outcome would have been negative for Obama. Let us now consider the theoretical outcome of the policy game in three different situations.

First, In the policy game *before* the gas attacks on August 21st, 2013, Obama took either the role of a status quo player which tried to contain policy change, or the role of change advocate who pressed for incremental reform. Figure 5 shows the outcome of the policy game if Obama is to be seen as a status quo player (Based on Boin, ‘t Hart, and McConnell, 2009, pp. 90):

Figure 5: Obama as status quo player:

| | | |
|------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Change advocates Status-quo Players | McCain and Graham press for policy paradigm shift | Press for incremental reform |
| Cruz and Paul resist policy change | I: Policy stalemate or politically imposed shift | II: Policy stalemate or politically imposed incremental adjustment |
| Obama tries to contain policy change | III: Major and shift rhetorical/symbolic change; more incremental substantive change | IV: Negotiated incremental adjustment |

In this case, according to the theory, a major and swift rhetorical/symbolic change or a more incremental substantive change should have taken place. Empirical evidence proves however that this is was not the case, as no major and swift changes took place. The additional humanitarian aid needs to be seen as an accommodating gesture, not as a substantive change because it does not directly go against the existing foreign policy of Obama (Dionne, 2009).

Second, figure 6 shows the outcome of the policy game if Obama is to be seen as an advocate for change, pressing for incremental reform (Based on Boin, ‘t Hart, and McConnell, 2009, pp. 90):

Figure 6: Obama as change advocate:

| | | |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Change advocates | McCain and Graham press for policy paradigm shift | Obama presses for incremental reform |
| Status-quo Players | | |
| Cruz and Paul resist policy change | I: Policy stalemate or politically imposed shift | <i>II: Policy stalemate or politically imposed incremental adjustment</i> |
| Contain policy change | III: Major and shift rhetorical/symbolic change; more incremental substantive change | IV: Negotiated incremental adjustment |

Here, the theory suggests that a policy stale mate *or* a politically imposed incremental adjustment took place. The evidence proves that this is most likely, because the humanitarian aid was politically imposed and adjustments were made several times.¹⁷ Remarkably, this suggests that Obama was a change advocate for his own designed policy. Boin, ‘t Hart, and McConnell (2009) state, as described in the theoretical framework, that office holders who make up certain policies do not necessarily have to support them at all times. Public office holders thus can become change advocates.

Third, figure 7 shows Obama’s new position in the aftermath of the poisonous gas attack on August 21st 2013 (Based on Boin, ‘t Hart, and McConnell, 2009, pp. 90). Here, Obama’s new position is defined as a proponent of a policy paradigm shift.

¹⁷ See for example <http://www.whitehouse.gov/photos-and-video/video/2013/01/29/president-obama-announces-155-million-additional-humanitarian-assi> and <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/06/17/fact-sheet-president-obama-increases-humanitarian-assistance-syrians> for different periods and different amounts of humanitarian aid.

Figure 7: Obama as proponent of policy paradigm shift:

| | | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>Change advocates</p> <p>Status-quo Players</p> | <p>Obama, McCain, Graham press for policy paradigm shift</p> | <p>Press for incremental reform</p> |
| <p>Cruz and Paul resist policy change</p> | <p><i>I: Policy stalemate or politically imposed shift</i></p> | <p>II: Policy stalemate or politically imposed incremental adjustment</p> |
| <p>Contain policy change</p> | <p>III: Major and rhetorical/symbolic change; more incremental substantive change</p> | <p>IV: Negotiated incremental adjustment</p> |

This figure suggests that either a political stalemate or a politically imposed paradigm shift would take place. Its projected consequences on the outcome of the policy game thereby align with the possible outcome the surveys suggest us. By voting no, Congress would have created a political stalemate in which Obama would have been hindered to go through with his paradigm shift.

Two possible consequences emerge of the influence this political stalemate could have on Obama’s response towards Syria: first, Obama can accept the congressional vote and reject his own policy ideas of a military intervention. Most likely, he will take a step back and will again try to push for incremental reform. In this case, the political stalemate will have stopped Obama’s momentum and will give no policy change at all. Second, Obama could ignore the congressional vote and still implement a military intervention. This unpopular move would be very unlikely, according to the literature on crisis exploitation, because Obama himself emphasized the importance of Congress and a ‘strong democracy’. He stated the following on August 31st, 2013:

.. But, having made my decision as commander in chief, based on what I am convinced is our national security interest, I am also mindful that I am the president of the worlds’ oldest constitutional democracy. I have long believed that our power is rooted, not just in our military might, but in our example as a government of the people, by the people and for the people. That’s why I have made a second decision. I will seek authorization for the use of force from the American peoples representatives in Congress... I have heard from

members of Congress who want their voices to be heard. I absolutely agree... All of us should be accountable as we move forward, and that can only be accomplished with a vote... Yet while I believe I have the authority to carry out this military action without specific congressional authorization, I know that the country will be stronger if we take this course and our actions will be even more effective (BO 3).

By implementing his policy without congressional approval, Obama opposes his own statements, damaging his reputation severely. This could have serious consequences for his credibility (Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell, 2009).

The entire process of creating a response is heavily influenced by partisan interests. It is because of the opposition that a political stalemate can place, which in turn was fostered by the opportunity Obama provided them in Congress. John McCain noted that Obama would have 'a hard sell' in Congress, thereby suggesting that he had to convince a lot of people. Obama recognized the difficulty of this sell and emphasized the importance of the subject by warning his colleagues for the dangers of partisan differences:

... As a consequence many people have advised against taking this decision to Congress... So to all members of Congress, of both parties, I ask you to take this vote for our national security. I am looking forward to the debate. And in doing so I ask you, members of congress to consider that some things are more important than partisan differences, or the politics of the moment. Ultimately this is not about who occupies this office at any given time. It's about who we are as a country (BO 3).

So although Obama recognized the dangers of bringing his policy changing ideas to Congress, he underestimated this danger and the influence the opposition could have on his initial policy ideas. In the crisis exploitation game, the opposition can effectively damage Obama's reputation by blocking his plans, and win support for their own ideas against a military intervention because these were favorite among the American population (Polling Report, 2013; Steinhauer and Helton, 2013; Landler and Thee-Brenan, 2013). The political stalemate that could have followed, means that no new policy would be adopted. Therefore Ted Cruz and Rand Paul 'win' the framing contest. One way to damage a presidents reputation is to undermine his legitimacy and to block his legislative power (Fine, 1996). Because Obama is not able to get the majority in his own government, it is questionable that he represents the

majority of the people in a democratic society (Polling Report, 2013; Steinhauser and Helton, 2013; Landler and Thee-Brenan, 2013). Therefore, the consequence of the outcome of the framing contest influenced the crisis exploitation game by damaging the reputation of Obama and improving the reputation of the opposition.

Conclusion

In this thesis I attempted to explain Barack Obama's response to alleged human rights violations in the Syrian civil war in three steps, by using the theory of framing contests as my analytical framework.

The first step was to define the postures and posture changes of the subject actors, based on concepts from the first framing contest. The first framing contest provided four theoretical frames with which the actual frames of the subject actors could be aligned. Barack Obama framed the events as big and bad in order to win support for his new policy. He emphasized the profound implications the alleged human rights violations could have on American credibility and, in turn, expressed concerns about what the consequences could be of this loss of credibility on American national security interests. John McCain and Lindsey Graham were early to frame the conflict as big and bad, while Ted Cruz and Rand Paul framed the conflict as big, but not bad. Obama was the only investigated actor whose posture changed.

The second step was to identify the influence of these postures and posture changes on the outcome of the policy game. The policy game could take shape because Obama decided to take the debate to Congress. While Ted Cruz and Rand Paul, and John McCain and Lindsey Graham remained on the same side of the policy game, Barack Obama's stance in the policy game shifted from 'pressing for incremental reform' or 'containing policy change' to 'pressing for policy paradigm shift'. This step served as a stepping stone for step three.

The third step was to make use of this outcome and identify its consequences on the political process. The outcome of Barack Obama's change to a change advocate who pressed for a policy paradigm shift was a policy stalemate in which Obama's momentum was halted. Surveys suggest that Congress was most likely to vote against Obama's plan, robbing him of his legislative power in the matter. This policy stalemate was fostered by partisan interests, for which Obama warned on August 31st, 2013. The consequence of the policy stalemate would be that Obama's reputation was damaged and the opposition gained in popularity.

Although Obama could have proceeded with a military intervention in Syria, surveys suggest that the majority of Americans were opposed to a strike, making a move which neglects the congressional vote very unpopular and thus very unlikely according to the theory on crisis exploitation.

This leads to conclude that framing contests have a significant influence in the process of creating a response. In addition, these framing contests are subject to partisan interests and can be used by the opposition to effectively damage public office holders. As the above case study showed, partisanship in a framing contest was very likely to block Obama's policy change, effectively damaging his reputation. So although human rights violations call for an international response, Barack Obama's response towards the Syrian civil war was subject to internal political processes in such a way that his initial response towards alleged human rights violations was significantly altered and maybe even blocked altogether.

This notion is very important for future studies because it emphasizes the possible implications of internal political struggles in the form of partisanship on foreign policy. This case study suggests that internal political processes in the form of framing contest heavily influence American foreign policy, making these processes an influencing factor in world politics. Future research on American foreign policy should always include this notion because it can have profound implication on the eventual policy that is enforced, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of creating American foreign policy. In addition, the case study as presented here offers space for future study on the subject of partisan conflict, framing contests, crisis exploitation and their interconnectedness.

Appendixes

| Code, in order of appearance in text | Actor, Subject |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| BO 1 | US President Barack Obama in 'red line' warning to Syria over chemical weapons, 2012 |
| JM 1 | John McCain, Congress vote against military action in Syria would be catastrophic, 2013 |
| JM 2 | John McCain, Calls for US attack on Syria Today in Senate, 2012 |
| BO 2 | Barack Obama, Address to the nation on Syria, 2013 |
| BO 3 | Barack Obama, Congress will get its say on Syria, 2013 |
| LG 1 | Lindsey Graham, now is the time to take action in Syria.flv, 2012 |
| JMLG 1 | John McCain and Lindsey Graham, "Blocking Obama On Syria Would Be 'Catastrophic' For U.S." FULL!!, 2013 |
| LG 2 | Lindsey Graham, "After Tonight He Has NO Option! The President Has To Use Military Force!", 2013 |
| RP 1 | Sen. Rand Paul, Respond to President Obama's Speech on Syria, 2013 |
| TC 1 | Ted Cruz, 'This Week' Interview: Texas Senator on Congressional Debate to Strike Syria, 2013 |
| RP 2 | Rand Paul, President Absolutely Needs Congressional Approval To Go To War With Syria, 2013 |
| RP 3 | Rand Paul, Islamic Rebels In Syria Won't Be American Allies, Mistake To Get Involved, 2013 |

| | |
|--------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| JMLG 2 | John McCain and Lindsey Graham, Time for U.S. to arm Syrian rebels?, 2012 |
| JM 3 | John McCain, on CNN calling for air strikes on Syrian Gov. forces, 2012 |
| JMLG 3 | John McCain and Lindsey Graham, Obama Seeks Syria Support From Senators McCain and Graham, 2013 |
| RP 4 | Rand Paul, Blasts Stupid Senate for Wanting to Arm Syrian al-Qaeda Fighters, 2013 |
| TC 2 | Ted Cruz, Hey, let's invade Syria to destroy its chemical weapons stockpile, 2013 |
| BO 4 | Barack Obama, Announces \$155 Million in Additional Humanitarian Assistance for the Syrian People, 2013 |

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