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Misalignment of the Objectives of U.S. Allies in the Failure of the Syrian War, 2011–2024

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the reasons for the failure of the coalition comprising the United States and its allies in Syria from 2011 to 2024 by examining the relationship between the misalignment of objectives, divergence in security perceptions, and the failure of multilevel interventions. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of alliance formation, proxy warfare, and defensive realism, and relying on field data and credible international reports, the study demonstrates that the roots of the coalition's failure lay not in a lack of hard power but rather in structural conflicts among the interests of key actors, particularly the United States, Türkiye, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the European Union. This divergence led to the emergence of parallel arms-supply networks, weakened the cohesion of opposition forces, intensified competition among regional sponsors, and prevented the development of a shared vision for the postwar period. These factors ultimately created opportunities for Russia and Iran to expand their influence and for the Syrian government to restore its power. The findings indicate that, in proxy wars, the alignment of objectives and threat perceptions plays a more decisive role than military superiority, and that the absence of such alignment can lead even the most powerful coalitions to failure. As a theoretical implication, the study suggests that future research should pay particular attention to the role of decision-makers' cognitive mapping in multilateral interventions and its impact on coalition cohesion, since latent cognitive divergences often shape the trajectory of intervention and the political outcomes of wars more profoundly than material constraints.

Keywords: *objective misalignment; alliance formation; proxy warfare; divergence of interests; cognitive policymaking; threat perception; multilevel intervention; Syria; competition among sponsors; defensive realism*

Introduction

The Syrian war from 2011 to 2024 became one of the longest, most multilayered, and most geopolitically complex conflicts of the twenty-first century; a conflict that began as a social protest but rapidly evolved into an arena for confrontation among regional and global powers. In this context, the U.S.-led coalition, comprising the European Union, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Western-backed non-state actors, sought to alter Syria's political structure and redefine the regional balance of power by providing the opposition with financial, intelligence, diplomatic, and military support. Nevertheless, despite the extensive resources and capabilities available to this coalition, the common strategy pursued by the United States and its allies neither resulted in regime



change, nor succeeded in limiting Iran's influence, nor prevented the consolidation of Russia's role, nor even managed to reconstruct Syria's political order to any meaningful extent. This protracted failure was not the result of insufficient power but rather the direct consequence of "strategic misalignment, conflicting objectives, and divergence in threat perceptions" among U.S. allies from 2011 to 2024.

Classical and contemporary literature on alliance formation in international relations, including theories of alliance failure, threat overlap, and sponsor competition, emphasizes that multilateral intervention succeeds when actors' objectives are aligned, threat hierarchies are shared, and perceptions of consequences are coordinated. In the Syrian case, however, internal divisions within the U.S.-led coalition became evident from the earliest years and persisted through 2024. The United States oscillated between two contradictory agendas: counterterrorism and regime change; Türkiye assigned absolute priority to containing Kurdish forces aligned with the United States and repeatedly circumvented Washington's policies; Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates sought to contain Iran and counter political Islam; Qatar insisted on supporting Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated movements; Europe was preoccupied with the migration crisis and security threats; and ultimately, each of these actors established its own independent military, intelligence, and proxy networks. This structural divergence not only eroded the cohesion of the opposition but also transformed Syria into an arena of "sponsor competition," which diminished the coalition's operational capacity while increasing the relative advantages of Iran, Russia, and the Syrian government.

During the second decade of the war, these divisions became deeper and more complex. After 2018, U.S.–Türkiye disagreements over Kurdish forces intensified; the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia moved toward rapprochement with Damascus; Qatar pursued a separate foreign-policy trajectory; and the United States effectively shifted toward a policy of "crisis management" rather than "crisis resolution." During the same period, Russia and Iran consolidated their political and military presence, filled the vacuum created by Western disunity, and seized the operational initiative. The continuation of this situation through 2024 demonstrates that the failure of the U.S.-led coalition in Syria was not merely a transient development; rather, because of structural contradictions, divergent threat perceptions, competing priorities, and the absence of a common strategy, it became a persistent pattern throughout the entire course of the war.

Focusing on the period from 2011 to 2024, this article argues that the misalignment of the objectives of U.S. allies was not a secondary variable but rather a central and decisive factor in prolonging the war, undermining the regime-change project, strengthening the Syrian government, facilitating Russian intervention, and increasing Iran's regional influence. Drawing on alliance theory, multilevel documentary analysis, and examination of battlefield developments, this study demonstrates that the failure of Western interventions in Syria was primarily the result of a "crisis of strategic cohesion" rather than a shortage of hard power; and that in contemporary proxy wars, alignment of objectives and coordination of perceptions take precedence over military and financial capabilities.

Theoretical Framework

To analyze the failure of the U.S.-led coalition in Syria, a general reference to patterns of failure in multilateral cooperation is insufficient. Accordingly, the theoretical framework of this study is based on three established bodies of international relations theory, each of which illuminates a dimension of the complex behavior of the actors involved. First, classical theories of alliance formation explain that overlapping objectives and a shared perception of threat are essential conditions for alliance durability, and that any disparity in these two areas erodes cohesion from within. Second, the literature on proxy warfare and the concept of "sponsor competition" demonstrates how

uncoordinated support for non-state actors fragments opposition forces and diverts intervention from its original trajectory. Third, defensive realism and the theory of “threat overlap” enable us to understand why alliances remain stable only when their members define threats similarly and why, in the absence of such convergence, even materially powerful alliances move toward divergence and failure. Thus, these three theoretical approaches, not in isolation but in combination, provide a more comprehensive explanation of the failure of U.S. and allied intervention in Syria—an explanation that emphasizes structural misalignment, conflicts of interest, and divergences in threat perception as the principal sources of failure.

Theories of Alliance Formation

Theories concerning the formation and effectiveness of alliances in international relations emphasize that alliance durability and success depend above all on the degree of “overlap in objectives” and “shared threat perception” among members. Glenn Snyder explains in his classic work that whenever members of an alliance define the principal threat differently and assess the costs and benefits of participation in collective action unequally, the alliance becomes internally eroded, creating conditions for intracoalition competition, free-riding behavior, and ultimately strategic failure (1). Stephen Walt likewise demonstrates that alliance cohesion emerges only when members possess a “shared image of the threat,” because states align in response to common threats, and whenever this overlap disappears, the alliance inevitably moves toward divergence (2). This theoretical logic is clearly observable in the Syrian crisis. From its earliest years, the U.S.-led coalition lacked a common understanding of the threat: the United States divided its priorities between overthrowing the Syrian government and confronting extremist groups; Türkiye regarded Kurdish forces as the principal threat and repeatedly undermined Washington’s strategy; Saudi Arabia viewed the problem primarily through the lens of Iran’s regional influence and supported different groups; Qatar emphasized movements affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood; and Europe was primarily concerned with refugee flows and the associated security risks. This lack of alignment in defining the threat transformed the coalition, rather than strengthening the opposition’s operational capacity, into a collection of conflicting support mechanisms, uncoordinated arms programs, and intra-alliance political competition. As Charles Glaser explains, disparities in objectives and costs push states toward incompatible strategies and thereby reduce alliance effectiveness, because security cooperation can remain durable only when the security priorities of the participants reinforce rather than neutralize one another (3). James Morrow similarly demonstrates that superficial and unstable cooperation rapidly collapses under conditions of crisis and that states in such circumstances return to the logic of competition and self-help (4). Taken together, these theoretical foundations demonstrate that the failure of the U.S.-led coalition in Syria was not the result of material weakness but rather of structural divergence in objectives, conflicting threat perceptions, and operational competition among regional and extra-regional allies; factors that effectively paved the way for an expanded role for Iran and Russia and the weakening of Western actors.

Sponsor Competition and the Failure of Intervention

The literature on proxy warfare explains that when several states simultaneously support armed non-state actors but their support is neither aligned nor coordinated, a condition known as “sponsor competition” emerges; according to Andrew Mumford, this is one of the structural characteristics of modern proxy wars (5). Under such conditions, proxy groups, rather than operating within a unified strategy, become dependent on different and sometimes

contradictory sources of funding, weaponry, training, and political agendas. This reduces their operational cohesion, fragments their battlefield power, and severely disrupts military decision-making. Field-based research by Berman, Felter, and Shapiro likewise demonstrates that the proliferation of external sponsors reduces the effectiveness of armed groups, intensifies internal competition, weakens tactical coordination, and prolongs war because each sponsor seeks to shape the behavior of its proxy according to its own particular priorities (6). In addition, Geraint Hughes emphasizes “conflicting strategic agendas” among sponsors and demonstrates that proxy wars in multi-sponsor environments, because of competition over influence and control, are less likely to produce strategic victory and more likely to result in long-term attrition and the failure of external intervention (7).

The Syrian war constitutes a classic example of this phenomenon. In this conflict, the United States, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and several European governments supported different and sometimes mutually hostile groups; some Türkiye-backed groups clashed with groups close to Qatar, Saudi Arabia sought to contain forces associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, and the United States strengthened groups that Türkiye regarded as threats to its national security. The result was the emergence of an extensively fragmented opposition structure, the absence of unified command, disagreements over political and military agendas, and ultimately a decline in the operational capacity of the Western coalition. Accordingly, consistent with the established literature on proxy warfare, “sponsor competition” was not a secondary factor but one of the principal causes of the failure of U.S. and allied intervention in Syria.

Defensive Realism and Threat Overlap

Defensive realism emphasizes that alliance durability depends more than anything else on “overlap in threat perception” among members. Stephen Walt demonstrates in his foundational work that states form alliances not simply because of the balance of power but because of a shared sense of threat; in other words, when members hold similar perceptions of the source of danger, an alliance can develop a stable structure, whereas divergent threat perceptions place the alliance on a path toward fragmentation from the outset (2). This theoretical principle is also consistent with Charles Glaser’s analysis, according to which states’ differing definitions of threats and divergent security priorities impede stable cooperation and lead governments toward uncoordinated strategies (3). From this perspective, “threat overlap” is a necessary condition for alliance success, and its absence generates internal erosion, negative competition, and operational failure.

This logic was precisely evident in the Syrian crisis. The United States simultaneously pursued two conflicting objectives: exerting pressure on the Syrian government and combating extremist groups. Türkiye viewed Kurdish forces as the principal threat and consequently found itself in conflict with many groups supported by the United States and Europe. Saudi Arabia prioritized containing Iranian influence and therefore supported groups that were in conflict with Qatar-aligned movements. Europe was more concerned with refugee flows and the threats associated with them. Qatar, by contrast, concentrated its support on movements affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. The result of such fundamental differences in threat perception was the emergence of an alliance that existed in name rather than in substance—one lacking a unified objective, a common strategy, and effective coordination mechanisms. According to defensive realism, such a structure is inherently predisposed toward divergence and failure because, unless states perceive threats in broadly similar terms, neither political coordination, military cohesion, nor strategic success is possible. Syria represented precisely such a case of

divergence, and this lack of overlap in threat perception constituted one of the fundamental causes of the failure of the Western strategy in the country.

Table 1. Summary of the Theoretical Framework on the Failure of the U.S.-Led Coalition in Syria

Theoretical Dimension	Key Concepts	Findings and Implications for the Syrian Case	Main Sources
1. Alliance Formation Theories	- Overlap in objectives - Shared threat perception - Asymmetrical costs and benefits - Free-riding behavior and internal competition	- Absence of a unified definition of threat: United States (government + extremist groups), Türkiye (Kurdish forces), Saudi Arabia (Iran), Qatar (Muslim Brotherhood), Europe (migration) - Transformation of the coalition into a collection of conflicting military and political programs	(1); (2); (3); (4)
2. Sponsor Competition (Proxy Warfare)	- Multiplicity of sponsors - Dependence of proxy groups on different agendas - Reduced combat effectiveness - Expansion of internal competition	- Uncoordinated support: Türkiye (specific groups), Qatar (Muslim Brotherhood), Saudi Arabia (Salafi movements), United States (Kurdish forces) - Armed clashes among groups backed by different sponsors - Absence of unified command and severe fragmentation of the opposition	(5); (6); (7)
3. Defensive Realism and Threat Overlap	- Alliances formed on the basis of common threats rather than power alone - Overlap in threat perception as a condition for alliance durability - Divergent perceptions → inevitable fragmentation	- Severe conflict among threat perceptions: United States = two parallel threats Türkiye = Kurdish threat Saudi Arabia = Iran Europe = migration Qatar = Muslim Brotherhood - Nominal alliance without a common strategy → battlefield failure	(2); (3)

Historical Trajectory of Developments in Syria from 2011 to 2024

The Syrian crisis began in early 2011 as peaceful protests in cities such as Daraa and Homs against corruption, political repression, and economic stagnation; however, the government's coercive response, use of force, and comprehensive securitization of the protests transformed the situation in less than a year into an armed conflict and subsequently into a full-scale civil war (8). Gradually, armed opposition groups, the Free Syrian Army, and a network of Islamist organizations emerged, and as the government progressively withdrew from some areas, the country entered a phase of "territorial fragmentation." At the same time, financial, military, and logistical support from regional and extra-regional actors on both sides of the conflict transformed the Syrian civil war into an arena of geopolitical competition (8). From 2013 and 2014 onward, the emergence and expansion of the group known as the "Islamic State" in eastern Syria and western Iraq constituted a turning point in the war; at the height of its power, the group controlled nearly one-third of Syrian territory, and its seizure of Raqqa as its self-declared "capital" generated serious international concern (9). In response, beginning in 2014, a U.S.-led international coalition launched extensive air operations against the group, while in 2015 Russia also entered the war by deploying forces and initiating air operations in support of the government in Damascus; an intervention that, according to many analysts, shifted the balance of power in favor of the central government and created the conditions for recapturing cities such as Aleppo. From 2016 onward, Türkiye also conducted several military operations in northern Syria targeting both the Islamic State and certain Kurdish forces; as a result, parts of northern Syria effectively came under the control of Ankara-backed forces, further complicating the battlefield map and creating multilayered lines of contact (9). By the end of the first decade of the war, the conflict had become divided into three or four principal zones of influence: government-controlled areas supported by Russia and Iran, areas controlled by Kurdish forces and their U.S. allies, territories under the influence of Türkiye and aligned groups, and remaining jihadist enclaves in Idlib and its surrounding areas. During the same period, the human and economic costs of the conflict increased dramatically, millions were internally displaced or became refugees, and the Syrian economy lost approximately

half of its prewar gross domestic product. In subsequent years, although the intensity of fighting declined on many fronts and the conflict shifted from a phase of “rapidly changing front lines” toward a kind of “frozen but unstable situation,” the simultaneous presence of foreign forces, continuing sanctions, the war economy, and the absence of a comprehensive political settlement prevented the emergence of sustainable peace (8). Finally, after years of attrition, battlefield and regional changes, and the gradual strengthening of opposition forces on certain fronts, Bashar al-Assad’s government fell in December 2024 after nearly fourteen years of civil war; nevertheless, armed clashes and competition among domestic and foreign actors continued in parts of the country, and the Syrian crisis entered a new phase characterized by political transition, difficult reconstruction, and contestation over the postwar order (9).

Objectives and Interests of the Different Actors

This section comparatively analyzes the objectives and interests of the principal actors involved in the Syrian crisis, each of whom entered the conflict with different threat perceptions, security priorities, and geopolitical calculations. Although the United States, Türkiye, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the European Union all ostensibly emphasized the need to contain violence, prevent the expansion of extremist groups, and manage Syria’s political future, in practice they operated on the basis of substantially different perceptual frameworks and objectives. This section demonstrates how these different priorities—from the U.S. objective of containing Iran’s regional influence and reliance on Kurdish forces, to Türkiye’s priority of preventing the emergence of a Kurdish entity, the Qatar–Saudi rivalry over support for different opposition currents, and the European Union’s human-centered approach—produced an alliance that was nominally united but substantively divergent. This analysis provides the basis for understanding that differences in initial objectives, rather than weakness in power or resources, constituted the principal source of the coalition’s strategic failure.

United States

From the beginning of the Syrian crisis, U.S. policy was shaped by a combination of geopolitical objectives, security considerations, and regional competitive calculations. According to analyses of the early phase of the conflict, Washington’s principal objective from 2011 to 2013 was to exert pressure for “regime change” in Damascus and weaken the Tehran–Damascus–Beirut strategic axis, because U.S. decision-makers viewed the survival of the Syrian government as strengthening Iran’s position and increasing its regional influence (10). At the same time, analyses of U.S. Middle East policy emphasize that American policymakers regarded the Syrian crisis as part of a broader competition over “the future of the Middle Eastern order” and viewed the removal of the Syrian government as a means of reconfiguring the regional balance in favor of the United States and its allies (10).

However, with the emergence of the group known as the “Islamic State” and its rapid expansion in 2013 and 2014, U.S. priorities changed. The threat posed by the group rapidly became the most significant U.S. security concern in Syria, leading to the formation of a broad “counterterrorism coalition” and a concentration on air and ground operations against it (9). Within this framework, Syrian Kurdish forces, particularly the People’s Protection Units, became Washington’s most important ground partner because they represented one of the most organized and effective forces capable of halting the extremist group’s advance (11).

This choice, however, created a profound rupture in U.S. strategy. Türkiye, one of Washington’s most important allies within Western security arrangements, regarded the presence of armed Kurdish forces along its borders as a

direct threat to national security. Analyses of U.S.–Türkiye relations indicate that Washington’s effort to “simultaneously maintain relations with Türkiye while relying on Kurdish forces” created a strategic contradiction that generated unprecedented diplomatic tensions between Washington and Ankara (11). The United States consequently had to move unsteadily between two incompatible options: maintaining its strategic partnership with Türkiye while simultaneously relying on Kurdish forces as central actors in the campaign against extremist organizations. This situation effectively deprived Washington of the ability to formulate a “single and coherent strategy” and trapped U.S. policy within a set of conflicting choices (11).

Overall, the examination of established sources indicates that U.S. policy in Syria was structurally divided from the outset because of the gap between its declared objectives—regime change and containment of Iran—and operational necessities, particularly reliance on Kurdish forces to address security threats. These contradictions, identified in independent research as among the principal causes of Washington’s inability to produce a sustainable outcome, played a decisive role in the failure of U.S. policy in Syria and weakened the capacity of the coalition under its leadership.

Türkiye

Türkiye’s policy toward the Syrian crisis was shaped from the earliest years by domestic security concerns, geopolitical calculations, and regional competition. Analyses of Turkish policy indicate that, from 2012 onward, Türkiye’s principal concern was to prevent the emergence of a Kurdish entity along its southern border because Turkish leaders regarded Syrian Kurdish forces, particularly the People’s Protection Units, as an extension of the political-military organization of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party and believed that any autonomous Kurdish region in northern Syria would have direct and serious consequences for Türkiye’s national security (11). This structural concern effectively transformed the Kurdish issue into the central axis of Türkiye’s Syria policy, to the extent that many of Ankara’s decisions, including those taken at the highest political levels, were interpreted within the framework of “containing the Kurdish threat.”

Nevertheless, during the early years of the war, particularly until 2015, Türkiye simultaneously supported armed groups opposing the Syrian government and pursued the objective of “regime change”; according to Steven Cook, this objective was rooted in Türkiye’s effort to reshape the regional order and reduce Iranian influence in Middle Eastern geopolitical competition (12). However, once Kurdish forces gained strength in northern Syria, this geopolitical priority was displaced by a security-centered strategy. Türkiye’s military operations, including Operation Euphrates Shield, Operation Olive Branch, and Operation Peace Spring, were fundamentally aimed at pushing back Kurdish forces, establishing a “buffer zone” along the border, and preventing geographical continuity among Kurdish-controlled territories (9). These operations demonstrated that Türkiye was willing to alter the battlefield balance, deploy its military directly into Syria, and establish structures of local administration in northern Syria in order to prevent the emergence of a Kurdish entity.

This security priority placed Türkiye in direct conflict with U.S. policy because Kurdish forces were precisely the actors Washington had selected as its primary partners in the campaign against extremist organizations. Analyses of U.S.–Türkiye partnership dynamics emphasize that this contradiction brought relations between two major members of the Western alliance system to one of their most strained periods in decades and became a major factor in the erosion of coalition cohesion (11). Broader analyses of regional developments likewise indicate that Türkiye’s prioritization of the Kurdish issue over other foreign-policy objectives prevented Ankara from becoming a

consistently reliable partner for declared Western strategies in Syria and contributed significantly to the inability of the Western coalition to achieve a clearly defined political outcome (12).

Overall, Türkiye's policy in Syria combined security considerations, regional competition, and geopolitical objectives; however, its central and persistent priority remained "preventing the emergence of a Kurdish entity." This objective not only diverted Türkiye's strategy away from its initial objective of changing the Syrian government but also generated fundamental contradictions with the policies of the United States and other Western powers, thereby playing a significant role in the divergence of the anti-government coalition and the growing complexity of the Syrian battlefield.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia's policy toward the Syrian crisis was centered from the beginning on "containing Iran's regional influence" and "weakening the Tehran–Damascus–Beirut axis." According to Friedman's analysis of Middle Eastern strategic politics, Saudi leaders believed from 2011 onward that the survival of the Syrian government would strengthen Iran's regional position and preserve its access to the Mediterranean and Lebanon; accordingly, Riyadh regarded regime change in Syria as an essential component of its broader strategy for containing Iran (13). Saudi Arabia also regarded the fall of the Syrian government as an opportunity to alter the balance of power in favor of conservative Arab states and weaken the regional resistance axis (14). On this basis, extensive financial, military, and media support for armed opposition groups, particularly groups with Salafi orientations, became a central component of Riyadh's policy.

From 2012 to 2015, Saudi Arabia supported a network of armed groups that largely adhered to Salafi or Salafi-adjacent ideologies, and these organizations became highly active and influential on several fronts (15). However, this support did not necessarily correspond with U.S. objectives and calculations. Research on Saudi support for Syrian armed groups indicates that some Saudi-backed organizations not only adopted more hardline and ideological positions but were also distrustful of political projects supported by Washington, thereby widening strategic differences between Riyadh and the United States (15). Moreover, in its competition with Qatar for influence among Syrian armed groups, Saudi Arabia supported organizations opposed to the Muslim Brotherhood. This rivalry meant that, instead of generating synergy, external support contributed to competition, fragmentation, and internal weakening of the Syrian opposition (16).

Particularly after 2015, following Russia's military intervention and the shift in the battlefield balance in favor of the Syrian government, Saudi Arabia assumed a more prominent role in opposition diplomacy while continuing to seek to limit Iranian influence in Syria and prevent the emergence of a regional order aligned with Tehran through its support for armed groups compatible with Salafi orientations (13). Nevertheless, the combination of Saudi Arabia's ideological and geopolitical objectives, together with differences between Riyadh and Washington—particularly over which armed groups should be supported—meant that Saudi policy did not become integrated into a coherent Western strategy and instead indirectly contributed to opposition fragmentation and the erosion of anti-government cohesion.

Overall, Saudi policy in Syria combined "containing Iran," "weakening the Syrian government," "supporting aligned Salafi movements," and "competing with Qatar." Yet because these policies diverged from U.S. strategy and prioritized groups that were not always compatible with Western security considerations, they contributed to divergence among foreign sponsors and reduced the effectiveness of the Syrian opposition.

Qatar

Qatar's policy in the Syrian crisis from its earliest years combined ideological considerations, geopolitical competition, and an effort to consolidate an independent position among the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. According to Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, despite its limited geographic and demographic size, Qatar sought during the 2010s to play a role in Middle Eastern politics that exceeded its traditional weight, and Syria became one of the principal arenas for this geopolitical ambition (17). From the beginning of the crisis in 2011, unlike Saudi Arabia, which tended to support Salafi groups, Qatar organized its support around groups inclined toward Muslim Brotherhood ideology; this orientation reflected Qatar's longstanding ties to relatively moderate Islamist movements and its desire to promote an alternative political model in the Arab world (18).

This ideological divergence became one of the most important dimensions of Doha's rivalry with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. The disagreement between Qatar and Saudi Arabia in Syria concerned not only the types of armed groups each supported but also reflected a broader "discursive competition" between two different visions of the future political order of the Arab world: Qatar regarded electorally oriented Islamist movements as potentially legitimate political actors, whereas Saudi Arabia viewed such movements as threats to regional stability and traditional structures of power (18). Research on Qatar's role in the Syrian conflict further demonstrates that Doha sought, through support for Muslim Brotherhood-aligned opposition groups, to reduce Saudi influence among the opposition and establish itself as an influential actor and legitimate mediator (19). This multilayered ideological and geopolitical competition produced two distinct axes of support, effectively contributing to fragmentation within the opposition, divisions in command structures, and continued competition in the distribution of resources and weaponry. As Ulrichsen emphasizes, this rivalry not only weakened the effectiveness of opposition forces but also undermined overall policy coordination among Arab states toward Syria (17).

Overall, Qatar's policy in Syria can be understood along three dimensions: geopolitical competition with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, ideological support for Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated movements, and an effort to acquire greater regional political status. Although these objectives increased Qatar's capacity to play an active role, they simultaneously contributed to divisions among regional sponsors of the opposition and weakened the cohesion of the Syrian opposition.

European Union

The European Union's approach to the Syrian crisis was shaped less by strictly military-security considerations than by the "humanitarian, migratory, and social consequences of the war." Syria became one of the principal sources of migration to Europe during the middle years of the conflict, and the influx of refugees affected the social, economic, and political structures of numerous European countries (8). Consequently, the European Union viewed the Syrian crisis not only through the prism of regional stability but also in terms of a "humanitarian and migration-related threat," with its primary concern centered on managing the transnational effects of the conflict on European societies.

The European Union concentrated on three major areas: alleviating human suffering through extensive humanitarian assistance, preventing new waves of migration, and supporting the formation of a political framework based on multilateral negotiations (8). This approach naturally placed the European Union in a different position from the United States. Whereas Washington at various stages focused its priorities on "combating extremist

organizations” and “managing regional competition,” Europe analyzed the Syrian war primarily through the lenses of “humanitarian crisis” and “migration consequences.” This divergence in approach reduced operational coordination between Europe and the United States and led their policies at certain stages to proceed in parallel but not necessarily compatible directions (20).

Ultimately, the European Union based part of its approach on sanctions and extensive financial support for humanitarian relief programs, but its reluctance to engage in direct large-scale military intervention—unlike some coalition members—limited its influence over battlefield dynamics. Despite this limitation, Europe's role in humanitarian assistance, migration management, and efforts concerning postwar reconstruction remained among the most consequential components of its policy toward Syria in subsequent years (8).

Table 2. Comparison of the Objectives, Priorities, and Battlefield Behavior of the Principal Actors in Syria

Actor	Main Objectives	Operational / Ideological Priorities	Battlefield and Political Behavior	Consequences and Effects
United States	- Regime change (2011–2013) - Containing Iran - Combating extremist groups	- Reliance on Kurdish forces as ground partners - Maintaining relations with Türkiye	- Formation of the counterterrorism coalition (2014) - Military, training, and arms support for Kurdish forces	- Creation of a rift with Türkiye - Inability to formulate a unified strategy - Failure of the regime-change project
Türkiye	- Preventing the emergence of a Kurdish entity - Regime change in the early years	- Containing Kurdish forces as the principal threat - Regional competition with Iran	- Conducting Operations Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, and Peace Spring - Supporting aligned opposition groups	- Severe conflict with U.S. policy - Weakening opposition cohesion - Expansion of control over parts of northern Syria
Saudi Arabia	- Containing Iranian influence - Overthrowing the Syrian government	- Supporting Salafi movements - Countering Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated groups	- Financial and military support for Salafi groups - Active participation in the anti-Iran axis	- Competition with Qatar and the UAE - Fragmentation of the opposition - Reduced cohesion of the anti-government front
Qatar	- Strengthening the legitimacy of relatively moderate Islamist movements - Competing with Saudi Arabia and the UAE	- Supporting Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated groups	- Active financial and political support for Brotherhood-aligned opposition groups	- Ideological divisions within the opposition - Weakened coordination within the Arab coalition
European Union	- Managing the humanitarian crisis - Controlling migration flows	- Focus on humanitarian assistance - Opposition to large-scale military intervention	- Sanctions against the Syrian government - Financial support for relief programs	- Limited influence over battlefield dynamics - Strategic distance from U.S. security priorities

The Operational Arena and Manifestations of Misalignment

At the operational level, misalignment among U.S. allies was most clearly manifested in the emergence of several parallel networks for training and arming opposition groups. Case studies of the covert operation known as “Timber Sycamore” demonstrate that the Central Intelligence Agency implemented an extensive program from 2012 to 2017 to train and arm armed groups opposing the Syrian government, while U.S. Department of Defense special forces simultaneously conducted a separate “train-and-equip” program, and the U.S. Department of State implemented an independent civilian and political assistance program for another segment of the same opposition network (21). These three channels of assistance operated under different legal authorities, oversight mechanisms, and selection criteria, while Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Türkiye also maintained independent channels

for financing and supplying weapons. The result was the emergence of “competition among arms networks”: different opposition groups shifted among sponsors in pursuit of greater access to resources; some weapons were diverted to black markets and even extremist groups; and command and accountability structures became so fragmented that no single center effectively existed for strategic coordination or oversight of proxy forces (21).

As a consequence of this fragmentation among external sponsors, the battlefield structure of the opposition also became severely fragmented. Analytical studies of the Syrian war indicate that the opposition did not constitute a unified front but rather a collection of loose and shifting coalitions, each of which relied on one or more regional sponsors; Qatar and Türkiye supported a range of groups associated with Muslim Brotherhood currents, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates supported Salafi-oriented and other factions, while the United States primarily supported relatively more moderate groups and, in particular, Kurdish forces. This overlap and competition among sponsors repeatedly generated armed clashes among opposition groups themselves in northern and northwestern Syria, particularly between Türkiye-backed groups and other factions, thereby weakening their capacity against the central government and its allies (20). At the political level, no “common strategy” for the period following the possible removal of the existing government emerged. Research on peace and mediation processes in Syria indicates that while Western actors primarily emphasized political transition and constitutional reform, Türkiye focused on the Kurdish issue, whereas Iran and Russia concentrated on preserving the core structures of power and security institutions (20). This absence of a common strategy and fragmentation on the battlefield created an unprecedented opportunity for rival actors—particularly Iran, Russia, and allied forces such as Hezbollah—to alter the balance of power through direct military involvement and battlefield networking and to acquire control over large portions of Syrian territory and political processes (20).

Consequences of Misalignment

Structural misalignment among the external sponsors of the Syrian opposition had profound consequences for the course of the war and the fate of the country. The first consequence was the failure of the regime-change project. Analyses of coalition fragmentation indicate that fundamental disagreements among Western and regional actors—including the United States, Türkiye, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia—left the opposition without a unified strategy, common command structure, or coherent political vision, and this fragmentation eliminated its capacity to play a decisive role in a political transition (20). At the same time, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, in its assessment of the 2011–2019 period, demonstrates that divisions among external sponsors weakened the military and organizational capacity of opposition groups and effectively eliminated the possibility of implementing a regime-change scenario (8).

The second consequence of this misalignment was the strengthening of the Syrian government's position after 2016. Russia's entry into the war in 2015, together with Iran's networked support and that of its allied forces, occurred at a time when the opposition was constrained by sponsor competition, allowing the central government to recover rapidly and regain control over extensive areas of the country from 2016 onward (9). In fact, the absence of a cohesive opposition front and the lack of a common political strategy among external sponsors provided the Syrian government with its greatest opportunity to alter the balance of power in its favor by relying on its own allies.

The third consequence of the misalignment was the expansion of the regional role of Russia and Iran. Research on the fragmentation of the Syrian conflict demonstrates that divisions among Arab supporters of the opposition, together with U.S. policy contradictions concerning Kurdish forces, enabled Russia and Iran to operate with

relatively limited effective competition and to use direct military involvement to shape Syria's security and political structures (20). As a result, Syria increasingly became a consolidated sphere of influence for Moscow and Tehran.

The fourth consequence of this misalignment was the weakening of the credibility of the U.S. alliance-building strategy in the Middle East. Analyses of the Syrian war emphasize that the evident contradictions in U.S. policy—from reliance on Kurdish forces to disputes with Türkiye and the absence of a unified strategy among Washington and its Arab allies—reinforced the perception that the United States was unable to lead a durable and outcome-oriented coalition (8). This erosion of confidence had direct implications for the structure of future alliances in the region.

Finally, the most significant humanitarian consequence of this misalignment was the expansion of the humanitarian catastrophe and the prolongation of the war. According to the comprehensive ESCWA report, fragmentation among external sponsors and the absence of a shared political pathway contributed to the continuation of the Syrian crisis for more than a decade rather than only a few years, with humanitarian consequences reaching extraordinary levels in contemporary history: millions of internally displaced persons and refugees, hundreds of thousands of deaths, and the destruction of a substantial share of the country's economic and social infrastructure (8). Broader assessments of the war likewise indicate that its protracted nature and the absence of a political settlement transformed Syria into one of the largest humanitarian catastrophes of the post-World War II era (9).

Consequently, misalignment among the sponsors of the opposition not only prevented the coalition from achieving its original objectives but altered the trajectory of the conflict in ways that strengthened the central government, increased the influence of U.S. rivals, weakened the cohesion of Western policy, and deepened the humanitarian crisis.

Table 3. Consequences of Misalignment among External Sponsors of the Syrian Opposition

Consequence	Analytical Description	Evidence and Approved Sources
Failure of the Regime-Change Project	Lack of coordination among the United States, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar left the opposition without unified command, a coherent political roadmap, or sufficient organizational capacity; this fragmentation eliminated the possibility of an effective political transition and overthrow of the Syrian government.	(20)
Strengthening of the Syrian Government after 2016	Russia's intervention and Iran's networked support, at a time when the opposition was fragmented and affected by sponsor competition, enabled the Syrian government to regain substantial territory and shifted the balance of the war in its favor.	(9)
Expansion of Russian and Iranian Influence	Divisions among opposition sponsors created a favorable operational environment for direct Russian military intervention and expansion of Iran's proxy networks, consolidating the influence of both powers in Syria.	(20)
Weakening of the Credibility of U.S. Alliance-Building Strategy	U.S. strategic contradictions—from reliance on Kurdish forces to disagreements with Türkiye and the absence of a unified approach with Arab allies—reduced regional confidence in Washington's leadership capacity.	(8)
Expansion of the Humanitarian Crisis and Prolongation of the War	The absence of a common strategy and competition among opposition sponsors prolonged the crisis for more than a decade; millions of displaced persons, hundreds of thousands of deaths, and extensive infrastructure destruction resulted.	(8); (9)

Discussion and Analysis

The cumulative battlefield evidence and strategic reports demonstrate that the failure of multilevel intervention in Syria was not merely the result of the military capabilities of the Syrian government and its allies but rather a direct consequence of conflicting interests and structural divergence among the opposition's own sponsors. ESCWA's

assessment of the Syrian war demonstrates that, from 2014 onward, Syria became an arena of multilayered interaction among global and regional powers, while no unified framework existed among these actors for aligning objectives, managing proxy forces, or designing the “postwar” phase (8). Under such conditions, multilevel intervention, rather than functioning as a coherent project for regime change and reconstruction of the political order, became a set of parallel and sometimes contradictory operations, each following its own logic. Consistent with the alliance literature, this fragmentation structurally increases the likelihood of failure because the weaker the overlap in objectives and shared threat perceptions, the greater the coordination costs and the higher the probability of alliance erosion.

In this context, structural conflicts among key actors, such as the Türkiye–United States divide and the Saudi Arabia–Qatar rivalry, eroded the anti-Syrian-government coalition from within. ESCWA’s account of the international dimensions of the conflict emphasizes that Syria initially became an arena of “regional proxy wars” and subsequently a theater for the direct involvement of global powers, with each power introducing into the conflict a network of interests and sensitivities through the non-state actors it supported (8). Türkiye, according to independent analyses, made containment of Kurdish forces and prevention of an autonomous entity in northern Syria its principal concern, whereas the United States for an extended period defined Kurdish forces as the main pillar of its ground campaign against extremist groups; this divergence generated a structural contradiction at the core of the coalition. At the Arab level, Qatar’s support for Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated groups and Saudi Arabia’s reliance on Salafi and anti-Brotherhood movements created two competing axes within the bloc supporting the opposition. Ulrichsen demonstrates that this rivalry reduced Qatar’s credibility among its conservative neighbors and intensified opposition fragmentation (17). Thus, a project discursively presented as a “unified coalition for regime change” was, in practice, a network of smaller, competing, and sometimes mutually hostile coalitions.

One of the most prominent manifestations of this misalignment was the U.S. strategic decision to rely almost exclusively on Syrian Kurdish forces as its principal proxy force in ground operations. In his study of the U.S. relationship with the Syrian Democratic Forces, Maguire demonstrates that by assigning much of the responsibility for ground operations against extremist groups to these forces, Washington effectively tied itself to a partner whose long-term interests—particularly regarding Kurdish autonomy and relations with Türkiye—were inconsistent with the calculations of Western allies (11). The analysis further indicates that, in selecting its proxy partner, the United States both underestimated the long-term interests of Kurdish forces and failed to manage conflicting expectations between Türkiye and the Kurdish forces; consequently, every step taken to strengthen the Kurdish forces intensified Turkish resentment and further eroded coalition cohesion (11). ESCWA likewise emphasizes that following Russia’s direct intervention and the consolidation of Iran’s support networks, continued disagreements among opposition sponsors increasingly benefited the Syrian government and its allies and further reduced the possibility of advancing a consensual political settlement (8).

Analytically, the misalignment of interests and structural contradictions within the coalition produced several principal consequences: first, the gradual collapse in practice of the “regime-change narrative” and its replacement by narrower, security-centered narratives; second, the strengthening of the Syrian government and its allies as the only relatively cohesive bloc on the battlefield; third, the weakening of the credibility of the U.S. model of alliance building in the region, particularly among sections of public opinion and certain elites who interpreted the experience as an example of “abandoning partners” and unreliable commitment; and fourth, the prolongation of the war and deepening of the humanitarian catastrophe, as illustrated by ESCWA’s assessment of the human and economic

losses (8). From this perspective, the failure of intervention in Syria was not simply the failure of a military operation but a failure in the design and management of a coalition that had, from the outset, been constructed on fragile overlaps and conflicting interests.

Table 4. Analytical Framework of Misalignment and the Failure of Multilevel Intervention in Syria

Analytical Dimension	Findings and Arguments	Approved Sources
Nature of Multilevel Intervention	From 2014 onward, intervention in Syria became an arena of simultaneous involvement by global and regional powers; however, no common framework existed for aligning objectives, managing proxy forces, or designing the postwar period.	(8)
Structural Fragmentation within the Coalition	The operations did not constitute a single project but rather a collection of parallel and contradictory actions; each actor followed its own logic, structurally increasing the probability of failure.	(8)
Internal Contradiction: Türkiye–United States Divide	Türkiye regarded containment of Kurdish forces as its principal objective, whereas the United States defined Kurdish forces as the central pillar of the ground campaign against extremist groups; this contradiction undermined the foundations of the coalition from within.	(8)
Internal Contradiction: Saudi Arabia–Qatar Rivalry	Qatar supported Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated groups, whereas Saudi Arabia supported Salafi movements; consequently, the political-military opposition became divided into two competing ideological axes.	(17)
U.S. Strategic Decision to Rely on Kurdish Forces	The selection of Kurdish forces as the principal proxy force placed the United States in continuous conflict with Türkiye and eroded coalition cohesion; Kurdish interests were not aligned with those of Western allies.	(11)
Battlefield Consequences of Misalignment	Following Russia's intervention and the strengthening of Iranian networks, every disagreement among opposition sponsors directly benefited the Syrian government because it constituted the most cohesive bloc on the battlefield.	(8)
Final Analytical Outcome	Divergence of objectives generated four key consequences: collapse of the regime-change narrative, strengthening of the Syrian government, weakening of the credibility of the U.S. alliance-building model, and prolongation of the war and humanitarian crisis.	(8)

Conclusion

An examination of the trajectory of intervention by the United States and its allies in Syria demonstrates that the failure of this coalition was not the result of battlefield defeat, insufficient military resources, or weak operational capacity; rather, it was rooted in structural divergence and conceptual misalignment among the objectives of the participating actors. Even when the powers involved agreed on the necessity of intervention, they lacked a shared understanding regarding the “nature of the threat,” the “vision of the postwar order,” the “role of proxy forces,” and the “geopolitical consequences of victory.” The United States focused on containing Iranian influence, combating extremist organizations, and managing political transition; Türkiye identified Kurdish forces as the principal threat; Qatar concentrated on supporting movements affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood; Saudi Arabia emphasized containing the resistance axis and removing the Syrian government; and Europe assessed the crisis primarily through humanitarian and migration-related considerations. Rather than enhancing coalition capacity, this multiplicity of priorities generated “divergence among operational domains” and subsequently “the collapse of strategic cohesion.”

A key lesson for the international relations literature emerges from these contradictions: in proxy wars, hard power—even when abundant—cannot substitute for alignment of objectives. The Syrian experience demonstrates that alliance failure often occurs not on the battlefield but at the level of “decision-making architecture” and “threat perception.” Whenever actors hold different conceptions of threats, equip proxy forces for different purposes, or pursue conflicting political visions, even extensive cooperation becomes layered with latent competition. This was also the case in Syria: instead of concentrating on defeating the Syrian government or designing a political transition, proxy forces, under the influence of diverse support networks, became increasingly involved in internal

competition, sponsor switching, and intergroup conflict. This multilayered structure of contradiction ultimately increased the ability of the Syrian government and its allies to consolidate their territorial position and led to a gradual decline in the operational capacity of the opposition front.

At the theoretical level, the failure of the Syrian coalition highlights the importance of the concept of “cognitive alignment.” Multilateral interventions become sustainable when not only declared objectives but also “cognitive perceptions, decision-makers’ mental maps, and threat models” overlap. The divergence between the U.S. perception of the role of Kurdish forces and Türkiye’s perception of those same forces constitutes a clear example of the absence of such alignment. Similarly, the ideological disagreement between Qatar and Saudi Arabia concerning the nature of political legitimacy eroded the coalition from within. These conflicts demonstrate that, without a precise analysis of elite cognitive maps and of “how threats are perceived,” neither operational nor military coordination can produce sustainable outcomes, even when all material resources are available. Accordingly, future research should examine the role of “cognitive policymaking” as an independent variable in analyzing the failure or success of multilateral interventions. Methods such as “cognitive mapping,” “frame analysis,” and “analysis of threat constructs” can reveal hidden divergences in actors’ perceptions—divergences that often remain concealed behind apparent agreements but undermine the foundations of alliances at critical operational moments. The Syrian experience demonstrates that alliance failure often results not from tactical error but from failures of mutual understanding. Therefore, the international politics literature should increasingly move toward cognitive analysis of alliances in order to improve the capacity to anticipate similar failures in future interventions.

Finally, the Syrian experience, as one of the most complex proxy wars of the contemporary era, leaves policymakers with a fundamental lesson: without unity of purpose, alignment in threat perception, and agreement on the desired end state, no coalition—regardless of its power—can achieve a strategic outcome. This constitutes an important point of departure for future debates regarding the nature of intervention, multilateral cooperation, and the design of sustainable alliances in crisis-prone regions of the world.

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All authors equally contributed to this study.

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Transparency of Data

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