

U.S. and Russian Interventions in Syria: Russian Goals and Interests

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Both the Russian Federation and the United States have strong interests at stake in Syria, and these interests overlap in part, but not completely... Both the United States and Russia seek to ensure a stable and unified Syria, though the two countries disagree on how to achieve this. The Syrian war is the first serious military campaign since the Vietnam War, in which the air forces of two great military powers are operating in the same conflict area, supporting opposing sides.

Moscow wants to defeat Islamic extremism that may spread to Russia's neighbors or borders; it does not distinguish between the Islamic State (IS) and other anti-Assad groups. Washington, on the other hand, argues that some groups are "moderate" and therefore worthy of support. Russia has long maintained that propping up Assad is the only way to prevent Islamic radicalization of the region. The United States and its European allies hold that IS and Assad can be fought simultaneously. Russia's aversion to regime change, and the disappointment in how the post-Gaddafi period evolved in Libya, have stood in contrast to American enthusiasm for the Arab Spring revolutions and now-tarnished dreams of spreading democracy to the region.

Be that as it may, both Russia and the United States have come to believe that salvaging Syria is a key to future development of the Middle East. The United States and Russia now share more common ground on the Syrian question than before.

The October 2015 bombing of a Russian passenger jet in Egypt, and the terror attacks in Paris two weeks later, have created a moment where Russia, Europe, and the United States are convinced that IS terrorism emerging from the region will undermine their security and must be addressed at the source. This moment of potential cooperation may be fleeting, however, and should be exploited immediately.

Syria is a testing ground for a new model of international relations in an era when interdependence and clashes are connected to each other. Russia and the United States are conceptually far apart on Syria and the Middle East, and this gap cannot be fully bridged, not least because of geopolitical competition. Different perceptions of the reasons and consequences of the conflict are deeply rooted in the worldviews of the two countries. The United States instinctively prioritizes freedom over stability, while Russian leaders have the reverse preference. At the same time, the absence of a division of the world into ideology-driven blocks, as in the Cold War, offers options for cooperation when goals temporarily coincide.

In a worst-case scenario, where terror attacks launched from the region are directed across the Middle East, Europe, and even Russia, the major outside powers (especially Russia, the United States, and France) may conclude that a coordinated international large-scale military operation is the only solution.

Russian Goals

- The primary Russian goal is to defeat the type of Islamic extremism represented by IS and other militant groups in Mesopotamia, spreading to other places from there. Russia tends to disregard the distinction between the Islamic State (IS) and other groups, viewing IS as but one incarnation of jihadi fighters which can develop into other forms. The United States, in contrast, draws sharper distinctions between Syrian opposition groups, arguing that some are “moderate” and hence worthy of support
- The biggest difference in perspective between the United States and Russia is that the latter sees the Assad regime as the only means to counter the Islamic radicalization of the region. Military experts agree that IS cannot be defeated by airstrikes alone, but no outside powers are ready to deploy boots on the ground to hit IS directly. In the Russian view, alliance with the Syrian army and sectarian militias is therefore the only way to substantially influence the situation.
- Moscow is not bound to support the Assad family forever (indeed, in late October its tone already reflected a less Assad-centric position), but believes a new setup of power can be reasonably discussed only after the territory of Syria (ideally whole, possibly divided) is secured and the Syrian state survives. The idea of a simultaneous struggle against Assad and IS, as advocated by the United States and its allies, appears to Russia to be a direct path to [victory for the Islamic State], with Damascus as its capital.
- One could [say] that a main objective of the Russian operation is to establish a solid footprint in the Middle East and thereby guarantee a Russian role in shaping the future of the region. The Russian leadership has no doubt that the Middle East will be an area of severe instability for years if not decades to come. This instability will inevitably spill over to the whole of Eurasia, and Moscow will need to keep a presence there in order to have power projection capacity and influence political developments. (For example, the traditional notion of “European security” is now inseparably linked to the Middle East, and all institutions in this area should be reconsidered.) Syria is believed to be key to the future development of the entire region. The Middle East as created in the twentieth century is being effectively and irreversibly deconstructed, yet it remains crucial for Russia in many regards.
- Russia also wants to at last draw a line under the period of regime change as a means to settle regional conflicts. Libya was the last straw. In this regard, Russia is perhaps pushing against an open door inasmuch as the United States appears to have lost its appetite for such policy.

