

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

U.S. Goals

- The primary U.S. goal is to defeat the Islamic State (IS). Only the emergence of the IS threat prompted the United States to intervene directly in Syria, and defeating IS appears to be the current top priority. In addition, the United States would like to defeat or at least weaken other Islamic extremist elements among the anti-Assad rebels.
- The United States' second main interest is to end the civil war. Doing so is the only way to stop the killing, end the flow of refugees to Europe, and restore order. A Syria at peace would become less of a breeding ground for Islamic extremism and pose less threat to the outside world.
- The third U.S. interest is to oust President Assad. The United States and its European allies blame him for turning an episode of domestic protest into a horrific civil war. They do not believe that any peace process can succeed in Syria with Assad in power. However, in recent statements, they have softened this position to reflect a willingness for Assad to play a "transitional" role. The pressures of reality may compel them to accept a longer-term role for Assad if there seems to be no prospect of dislodging him.
- Finally, the United States would like to see Syria remain a unified country, rather than be partitioned. Assad's ouster is seen as contributing to this goal; indeed, to allow Assad to reassert control over all of Syria is viewed as immoral and a recipe for future instability. A less tainted representative of Alawite interests, on the other hand, could contribute to a post-conflict government. This goal of a unified Syria may be sacrificed in the face of reality if Assad cannot be removed and other groups refuse to negotiate with him (aside from truces that implement de-facto partitions).