



Why Previous Attempts to End the Syrian Civil War Have Failed — and How to Move Forward

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On June 26, 2018, Syrian government armies moved through southwestern Syria as tens of thousands of civilians tried to escape Russian and Syrian airstrikes. People loaded onto trucks, moving further into terrain held by resistance forces. With fighting intensifying, this geopolitical and humanitarian crisis could threaten bordering Jordan and set off a clash between Iran and Israel.

At the same time, thousands of Syrians are taking flight toward Israel's border, creating the possibility of another confrontation. Military dedicated to President Bashar al-Assad and abetted by Russian airstrikes are in the final stages of attempting to recapture terrain occupied by a number of resistance groups. Israel does not want to become involved in the Syrian war. Yet as hostilities move nearer to its northern border and as an estimated 11,000 Syrian refugees inundate the region, Israel could be drawn in.

The Syrian civil war has become a proxy war in which Russia, the United States, and Iran engage in shadow skirmishes with global implications. In a world fractured in two, a diverse coalition of democratic countries encounters two authoritarian regimes – China and Russia. These two countries will collaborate with autocracies like Syria wherever it is to their advantage to do so. For instance, as Bashar al-Assad and his supporters surrounded the city of Aleppo, the United States – invoking the battle against ISIS – did nothing while Assad, Russia, and Iran demolished their enemies. From the first day of Russia's entrance into the civil war, the Assad regime's survival was no longer in doubt. After the obliteration of rebel-held eastern Aleppo, the regime's dominance was apparent. Aleppo has been a pawn in a larger geopolitical conflict, and Western democratic states failed to find a way to save the condemned.

The Syrian war has spawned many arguments about humanitarian interventions. The United Nations reports that 270,000 refugees left their homes in order to flee attacks in the neighboring province of Daraa and United Nations officials called Aleppo a "total meltdown of humanity." The current situation is yet another humanitarian disaster in Syria – and Syrians are calling on the international community to intervene. But the United States fails to meet humanitarian goals, as it aims to complete the ground war against Islamic State terrorists while reducing its participation in the Syrian civil war – and simultaneously tries to force Assad to relinquish chemical weapons.

The Troubled History of U.S. Involvement

The Obama Administration announced that Assad must be removed from power, but this goal was not achieved. President Obama also drew a red line against use of chemical weapons, but took no action when the line was crossed. U.S. failures in Syria have been multiple. Rhetorical pronouncements were made before an adequate plan was laid out – or perhaps without any clear intention to follow through. Certainly, no meaningful actions were taken towards delivering on poorly planned threats.

Currently, Washington under President Trump is focusing on chemical weapons and on the struggle against terrorists, pursuing objectives and using tactics that resemble those of the previous administration. There has been no consistent strategy in the Trump administration's approach to the civil war in Syria – a war that by now has resulted in nearly 500,000 deaths. Current priorities of blocking chemical warfare and defeating terrorists seem at odds with other announced plans to withdraw the 2,000 U.S. armed forces positioned in northeastern Syria.

What Could Be Done?

Can the Trump administration's intent to withdraw from Syria be reconciled with other U.S. goals? If so, the United States will have to stress international diplomacy. To ensure that any use of chemical weapons ends even as U.S. forces withdraw requires coordinating counter-proliferation demands through a variety of international organizations that could later inspect Syria's chemical plants. This, in turn, necessitates U.S. collaboration with Russia.

The missile strikes that President Trump ordered in an attempt to force changes in Syria amount to a makeshift action that is unlikely to bring about any enduring results. Demanding that Russia do more to sanction Syria for its actions could be a more effective strategy. The Trump administration would have to be specific about what it wants Russia's President Vladimir Putin to do to persuade Assad to destroy his chemical weapons. Conceivably, Washington could waive some sanctions targeted at Russia in return for Putin curbing the Assad regime. If Putin fails to control Assad, the United States might ratchet up sanctions imposed on Russia for its backing of this regime that defies the Chemical Weapons Convention.

As for regime change, the Trump administration could accept an agreement in which Bashar al- Assad would not abdicate at once, while Russia would demand that he resign by a stipulated time. The United States, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf Nations, and Turkey should all stop supplying their chosen resistance groups with weapons, while Iran and Russia leverage their backing of the Assad regime into a cease-fire with security pledges for defeated Syrian rebel forces. All other participants – Iranians, Tunisians, Lebanese, Chechens, Turkmen – should be required to depart.

Persuading all parties to accept and enforce a cease-fire will be a complex process, but could save thousands or hundreds of thousands of lives.

Outside forces must agree not to export arms to warring forces in Syria. Furthermore, the provision of humanitarian aid to displaced people must become a priority at the negotiating table. Any results that come from complex, multiparty negotiations to end the Syrian morass are likely to be messy and imperfect. But no government or leader, including the United States and President Trump, should mandate regime change if they are not capable of following through to ensure it happens.