

# Why Russia will prevail in Syria

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## ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

[...]the U.S. position on Syria has vacillated wildly since the Syrian conflict began in 2011. [...]Russia will remain the greatest power broker in Syria, limiting Washington's ability to exert leverage over Syrian affairs and reducing wider American influence in the Middle East. [...]Russia views the conflict in Syria as a proxy war that can weaken the United States and American influence in the Middle East. [...]Russia is deploying every possible weapon in this battle, including propaganda disseminated by Russian media and the Russian Orthodox Church.

## FULL TEXT

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights claims that Syrian and Russian warplanes killed more than 500 civilians, including 121 children, in Eastern Ghouta from Feb. 18 through Sunday. Moscow denies direct involvement, despite having deployed military forces in support of the Syrian government since 2015.

This weekend, after initial resistance, Moscow reluctantly agreed to a cease-fire after the Kuwaiti and Swedish draft sponsors omitted calls that it take effect in 72 hours. This cynical delay of the implementation allows Russia and its ally, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, time to rearm their forces for the next round of violence.

The continued Russian support for the Assad regime is part of a clear, coherent strategy. The tactics Russia deploys are wide-ranging, including using military force to defeat the Western-backed opposition in Syria and waging a sophisticated propaganda war on multiple fronts. Russia even seems willing to risk armed conflict with the United States —earlier this month, U.S. forces engaged Russian mercenaries in what might have been the deadliest battle between citizens of the former Cold War nemeses since that conflict ended. But this broad range of tactics works because Russia's end goal has remained consistent —to preserve Assad's regime and weaken U.S. influence in Syria, and in the Middle East more broadly.

The precise strategy of the United States, however, remains unclear. In fact, the U.S. position on Syria has vacillated wildly since the Syrian conflict began in 2011. Even within administrations, there hasn't been consensus on Syrian policy, because there hasn't been agreement on what the United States wants.

As long as Russia has coherent goals and a strategy for achieving them and the United States does not, Russia is destined to win the proxy war in Syria. Therefore, Russia will remain the greatest power broker in Syria, limiting Washington's ability to exert leverage over Syrian affairs and reducing wider American influence in the Middle East. Syria has long been a Russian ally. Historically, the Soviet Union was interested in the Middle East because Moscow perceived the region as its back yard, similar to how Washington perceived Latin America and the Caribbean. The Soviet Union viewed access to the Eastern Mediterranean as strategically vital, not least because the region contained an abundance of oil and natural gas.

Syria was a natural ally because the Syrians and the Soviets shared the goal of obstructing the United States and Israel from reaching unilateral peace treaties between Israel and Arab countries. As one of the most powerful Arab states belligerent toward Israel, Syria provided Moscow with influence in the Arab-Israeli conflict. In return, the Syrians received Russian military equipment, which allowed them to pursue strategic parity with Israel.

In 1955, Moscow invited Syria, along with Egypt, to join a pro-Soviet pact. When Turkey, a U.S. ally, mobilized troops to try to dissuade Syria from accepting, Soviet threats backed them down, cementing the Syria-Soviet relationship.

Soviet support for Syria was part of a greater regional strategic battle. The Kremlin supported Arab-nationalist and socialist-inspired governments, including those in Egypt, Libya and Iraq. The pro-Western governments of Israel, Turkey, Iran (before the 1979 Islamic revolution), Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia and Saudi Arabia constituted the U.S. bloc. The superpowers thus carved up the Middle East into allies and adversaries as part of their global proxy war. But alliances could, and did, change. Moscow viewed Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt as the strategic prize in the region. As the most influential Arab nation during the Cold War, Egypt became the largest recipient of Soviet economic and military aid. Yet after Nasser's death in 1970, Anwar Sadat, Egypt's new president, ended Cairo's socialist experiment, expelled Soviet advisers, embarked on unilateral peace with Israel and reoriented Egypt toward the United States.

Egyptian rejection devastated the Soviets and prompted Moscow to forge closer ties to more-radical regimes in the region, such as Syria. Cultivating Arab and Muslim support allowed Moscow freer rein in the region. Syria's refusal to condemn the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, for example, provided diplomatic cover for Russia's expansionist policies.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Syria confronted a historic choice — moderate its policies and realign with the West or continue its close relationship with the newly independent Russian Federation. Syria chose the latter, rejecting a U.S.-brokered unilateral peace with Israel during the 1990s. While Syria entertained a peace process to see what concessions could be extracted from the West, it would not stray too far from Moscow's orbit. When Assad succeeded his father in 2000, some were optimistic that he would work with Washington to achieve regional peace. Instead, Syria aided the Iraqi insurgency, which killed or wounded thousands of U.S. troops and strengthened its ties with Iran, further poisoning U.S.-Syria relations.

Today, Russia views Syria as critical on several fronts.

First, instability in Syria and the Middle East is a threat to Russian security. Two devastating wars against Chechnya and struggles to suppress a militant Islamist insurgency in the North Caucasus have made the Kremlin acutely aware of the threat of Islamist radicalism spilling into Russia. This makes it critical that Russia keeps Assad in power.

Second, Russia views the conflict in Syria as a proxy war that can weaken the United States and American influence in the Middle East. Therefore, Russia is deploying every possible weapon in this battle, including propaganda disseminated by Russian media and the Russian Orthodox Church.

Russia provides political cover for Syria at the United Nations — preventing condemnation of Assad's brutal regime, including using its veto power in the Security Council to block resolutions calling for sanctions and the prosecution of Assad on war-crimes charges. These moves help to keep Assad in power.

Ironically, Russia's propaganda campaign depicts its actions as part of the war on terrorism. These claims have two dimensions, one political and one religious, aimed at bolstering Assad and weakening the United States. First, Moscow promotes the Assad regime's claim that anyone opposing it is a terrorist. Indeed, Russia even argues that the United States has transformed a once-peaceful and tolerant Syria into a fractured nation plagued with terrorists. These claims aim to paint as terrorists the more-moderate rebels that Washington supports against extremist factions, making this support more difficult and discrediting Washington's image in the region. This reputational damage, in turn, limits Washington's ability to project power and influence.

The propaganda push to paint Russia as fighting terrorists also has a religious dimension: Russian outlets, including the Russian Orthodox Church, depict the conflict as part of a global holy war to exploit the fear and resentment that religious Americans and European Christians feel toward their leaders for not doing enough to defeat radical movements such as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. For example, the Russian-government-sponsored outlet RT focuses on the plight of Christian minorities in Syria, who are targeted by radical Islamist organizations.

But while Russia ostensibly declares war against the Islamic State, its invocation of religious motifs is merely a ruse to crack down further on opponents of the Assad regime — be they terrorists or rebel factions supported by the United States. This content's real goal is to weaken support for Western intervention against Assad. And it's

working.

And that's the real danger. While U.S. policy toward Syria has been ambiguous, Russia has spent decades bolstering an alliance that includes financial and military cooperation. It has clear goals —preserving the Assad regime and its access to critical ports, preventing an Islamist victory that could destabilize Russia and consolidating influence, while simultaneously eroding U.S. influence in the Arab world —and a clear strategy for achieving them. Unless the United States can come up with its own coherent policies to match this vision, Russia will prevail in Syria.

## DETAILS

<b>Subject:</b>	Radicalism; Cold War; Military aid; Peace; Religion; Armed forces; Invasions; Insurgency; Power; Propaganda; Rebellions; Religious orthodoxy
<b>Location:</b>	Middle East Turkey Russia Libya Israel Egypt Tunisia Latin America Iraq Afghanistan Iran Syria Morocco Cairo Egypt United States--US Saudi Arabia Arab countries Union of Soviet Socialist Republics--USSR Caucasus
<b>People:</b>	Nasser, Gamal Abdel (1918-70) Assad, Bashar Al Sadat, Anwar el- (1918- 81)
<b>Company / organization:</b>	Name: Russian Orthodox Church; NAICS: 813110; Name: United Nations--UN; NAICS: 928120; Name: Islamic State of Iraq &the Levant--ISIS; NAICS: 813940
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