

Comment

Ending America's Disastrous Role in Syria

Faced with an alarming risk of a renewed escalation of fighting, it's time for the United Nations Security Council to step in and end the bloodshed.

by Jeffrey D. Sachs

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"While vast resources were devoted to overthrowing Assad, the effort ultimately failed, but not before causing massive bloodshed and displacing millions of Syrians." (Photo: Domenico/flickr/cc)

America's official narrative has sought to conceal the scale and calamitous consequences of US efforts to overthrow Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. That is understandable, because US efforts are in blatant violation of international law, which bars UN member states from supporting

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military action to overthrow other members' governments.

Much of the carnage that has ravaged Syria during the past seven years is due to the actions of the United States and its allies in the Middle East. Now, faced with an alarming risk of a renewed escalation of fighting, it's time for the United Nations Security Council to step in to end the bloodshed, based on a new framework agreed by the Council's permanent members.

Here are the basics. In 2011, in the context of the Arab Spring, the US government, in conjunction with the governments of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, and Israel, decided to bring down Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime, even though overthrowing another country's government amounts to a blatant violation of international law. We know that in 2012, if not earlier, President Barack Obama authorized the CIA to work with America's allies in providing support to rebel forces composed of disaffected Syrians as well as non-Syrian fighters. US policymakers evidently expected Assad to fall quickly, as had occurred with the governments of Tunisia and Egypt in the early months of the Arab Spring.

The Assad regime is led by the minority Alawi Shia sect in a country where Alawites account for just 10% of the population, Sunni Muslims account for 75%, Christians make up 10%, and 5% are others, including Druze. The regional powers behind Assad's regime include Iran and Russia, which has a naval base on Syria's Mediterranean coastline.



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Whereas America's goal in seeking to topple Assad was mainly to undercut Iranian and Russian influence, Turkey's motive was to expand its influence in former Ottoman lands and, more recently, to counter Kurdish ambitions for territorial autonomy, if not statehood, in Syria and Iraq. Saudi Arabia wanted to undermine Iran's influence in Syria while expanding its own, while Israel, too, aimed to counter Iran, which threatens Israel through Hezbollah in Lebanon, Syria near the Golan Heights, and Hamas in Gaza. Qatar, meanwhile, wanted to bring a Sunni Islamist regime to power.

The armed groups supported by the US and allies since 2011 were assembled under the banner of the Free Syrian Army. In fact, there was no single army, but rather competing armed groups with distinct backers, ideologies, and goals. The fighters ranged from dissident Syrians and autonomy-seeking Kurds to Sunni jihadists backed by Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

While vast resources were devoted to overthrowing Assad, the effort ultimately failed, but not before causing massive bloodshed and displacing millions of Syrians. Many fled to Europe, fomenting Europe's refugee crisis and a surge in political support for Europe's anti-immigrant extreme right.

There were four main reasons for the failure to overthrow Assad. First, Assad's regime had backing among not only Alawites, but also Syrian Christians and other minorities who feared a repressive Sunni Islamist regime. Second, the US-led coalition was countered by Iran and Russia. Third, when a splinter group

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of jihadists split away to form the Islamic State (ISIS), the US diverted significant resources to defeating it, rather than to toppling Assad. Finally, the anti-Assad forces have been deeply and chronically divided; for example, Turkey is in open conflict with the Kurdish fighters backed by the US.

All of these reasons for failure remain valid today. The war is at a stalemate. Only the bloodshed continues.

America's official narrative has sought to conceal the scale and calamitous consequences of US efforts – in defiance of international law and the UN Charter – to overthrow Assad. While the US vehemently complains about Russian and Iranian influence in Syria, America and its allies have repeatedly violated Syrian sovereignty. The US government mischaracterizes the war as a civil war among Syrians, rather than a proxy war involving the US, Israel, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Qatar.

In July 2017, US President Donald Trump announced the end of CIA support for the Syrian rebels. In practice, though, US engagement continues, though now it is apparently aimed more at weakening Assad than overthrowing him. As part of America's continued war-making, the Pentagon announced in December that US forces would remain indefinitely in Syria, ostensibly to support anti-Assad rebel forces in areas captured from ISIS, and of course without the assent of the Syrian government.

The war is in fact at risk of a new round of escalation. When Assad's regime recently



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attacked anti-Assad rebels, the US coalition launched airstrikes that killed around 100 Syrian troops and an unknown number of Russian fighters. Following this show of force, US Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis disingenuously stated that, "Obviously, we are not getting engaged in the Syrian civil war." In addition, Israel recently attacked Iranian positions in Syria.

The US and its allies should face reality and accept the persistence of Assad's regime, despicable as it may be. The UN Security Council, backed by the US, Russia, and the other major powers, should step in with peacekeepers to restore Syrian sovereignty and urgent public services, while blocking attempts at vengeance by the Assad regime against former rebels or their civilian supporters.

Yes, the Assad regime would remain in power, and Iran and Russia would maintain their influence in Syria. But the US official delusion that America can call the shots in Syria by choosing who rules, and with which allies, would end. It's long past time for a far more realistic approach, in which the Security Council pushes Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, and Israel into a pragmatic peace that ends the bloodshed and allows the Syrian people to resume their lives and livelihoods.

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of *"The Age of Sustainable Development,"* 2015 with Ban Ki-moon.

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