

# Should the World Be Intervening Militarily in Syria?

by [Jeffrey White \(/experts/jeffrey-white\)](/experts/jeffrey-white)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Jeffrey White \(/experts/jeffrey-white\)](/experts/jeffrey-white)

Jeffrey White is an adjunct defense fellow at The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of the Levant and Iran.



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## Washington Institute military expert Jeffrey White contributes to an online debate on the merits and goals of potential intervention.

**T**wo and a half years into Syria's internal war, the situation has only become more complex, both politically and militarily. What was never an easy decision with respect to external intervention has become more challenging. This complexity, and attendant uncertainty, increases the difficulty of making a decision to intervene in Syria and of doing it right. It does not remove the need to do so.

Now may not be the best time to intervene, but there may not be a better time. The regime's behaviour is becoming worse. It is increasing its violence against civilians and has no intention of negotiating its suicide. The regime and its allies intend to defeat the opposition on Syria's battlefields, not to negotiate a transfer of power. Extremist elements within the rebel forces have risen in importance and capability. The sectarian aspect of the war has deepened.

Military intervention is already underway in Syria. It has been so for some time and is affecting the military situation in significant ways. The situation is something like the Spanish Civil War. One side is enjoying active and direct intervention while the other has only limited and hesitant support.

Intervention by the regime's allies -- Iran, Hizbullah, Russia -- has had the most impact on the war. Arms, ammunition, spare parts, soldiers, and advisers from its allies have kept the regime alive and fighting. Without this continuous stream of support the regime would likely have fallen. With it Bashar Assad has been able to fight on, employing increasingly higher levels of violence.

Outside powers have also intervened on the side of Syria's rebels, providing money, arms and ammunition, and permitting volunteers to join the rebels in Syria. This assistance has significantly improved rebel capabilities to engage regime forces, especially its critical armoured units. External aid has helped to keep the rebels in the fight. It has been far from enough to win the war.

There are two basic reasons for intervention on the side of the rebels. One is moral; the other is strategic. Morally,

the world should seek to put an end to a regime that is responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of Syrians, injury to tens of thousands more, and the creation of a refugee population numbered in the millions. The regime has conducted unrestricted warfare against the Sunni civilian population, employing conventional and irregular forces and using all the weapons and munitions in its arsenal, including high explosive, fragmentation, incendiary and now chemical. This wanton killing and maiming should be stopped and those responsible held accountable.

Intervention is also strategically sound. One outcome that needs to be prevented is a victory for Mr Assad. This is a possibility with only too clear consequences for Syria and the region. Intervention can prevent that outcome. The Iran-Syria-Hizbullah axis is a deeply challenging artefact in the Middle East region. One inimical to American, Western, and other regional states' interests, and a constant threat to regional stability. Aggressive, threatening, and possessing large and growing military capabilities, this alliance needs to be broken. Bringing Mr Assad down can accomplish that. Also important strategically is limiting the influence of extremist elements during the armed struggle against the regime and in the post-Assad situation. Intervention can weaken the extremists relative to more moderate elements both in the conflict against Mr Assad and during the political struggle that will occur after he is gone. Then, too, intervention can lead to influence in the post-Assad political struggle. Groups that have benefited from military assistance are more likely to be willing to work with those that helped than those that did not. This does not mean that those that provided assistance will control the situation, but the opportunity for influence will likely be there.

There are some things that intervention cannot do. It cannot "fix" Syria. Ultimately the Syrian people have to do that. But intervention can make Syria less broken. Intervention cannot end the war overnight or cleanly. But it can hasten the end of the regime, the central component of the conflict. Intervention cannot prevent reprisals or sectarian violence. But it can reduce the potential for them and strengthen the capabilities of more moderate elements within the opposition.

Intervention is not without risk. Casualties to intervention forces, inadvertently aiding the wrong groups, mission creep, increased involvement by Hizbullah and Iran, and the always-to-be-feared "unintended consequences" are possibilities. But the risks of doing nothing are also real: regime victory, triumphant extremism and chaos without influence.

External intervention needs to be conducted with a clear strategy and adequate means. The goals of external intervention should include ending the Assad regime, supporting moderate elements within the armed opposition, limiting the influence of extreme Islamist elements and creating conditions for a stable Syria. The strategy to achieve these goals should involve both direct military action against regime capabilities and indirect action to build up the combat capabilities of moderate units. Combining direct and indirect intervention offers the best prospects for a quick end to the regime and a favourable outcome within Syria.

*Jeffrey White is a Defense Fellow at The Washington Institute and a former senior defense intelligence officer.* ❖

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