

United States and Syria: Strained credibility

The United States' strategy in Syria has evolved over the five years of the conflict. Currently, the US aim is for a political solution to the civil war, seen as a precondition for the defeat of the ISIL/Da'esh terrorist group. Despite significant US military and diplomatic action, the effectiveness of the US strategy towards Syria and its implementation is widely criticised.

The evolving US strategy towards Syria

Territorial advances by the self-proclaimed 'Islamic State' – ISIL/Da'esh – in Iraq and Syria have influenced US policy on the Syrian [civil war](#), now in its fifth year. Initially, the Obama Administration insisted on Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's [departure](#), but since 2012 has [supported](#) international efforts towards multi-lateral negotiations for a settlement between the Assad government and opposition forces. In September 2014, the US, heading an [international coalition](#) of 60-plus states against ISIL/Da'esh, decided on a limited intervention in Syria, based on training and equipping vetted Syrian forces and on airstrikes against ISIL/Da'esh. Then, the US adopted an 'Iraq first' and 'ISIL-first' approach. However, changes in the dynamics of the conflict, including, since September 2015, Russian military involvement, prompted a reassessment of US policy in Syria and debate over the best response to Russia's actions. Recently, Secretary of State, John Kerry, [set out](#) the main US policy tenets on Syria: defeating ISIL/Da'esh; increasing diplomatic efforts to end the civil war; and supporting US allies in the region. In addition, President Barack Obama announced strengthened US military [efforts](#) against ISIL/Da'esh and increased diplomatic efforts for a 'political resolution to the Syrian war'. A negotiated settlement is now seen as necessary for the [defeat of ISIL/Da'esh](#).

Diplomatic involvement

Despite the presence of US forces in the conflict, the US Administration [insists](#) there is no military solution to the Syrian crisis (thus [discarding](#) robust ground intervention or forcible removal of Assad) and on the importance of diplomacy. For the US, the renewed political process to end the Syrian conflict should build on the common [interests](#) of the US, as well as its allies, and Russia and Iran, to defeat ISIL/Da'esh. The preferred US scenario is the managed removal of Assad, and the unification of opposition forces and remaining state security apparatus as US partners in fighting ISIL/Da'esh. While in October 2015 international [agreement](#) was found in Vienna to develop a transition plan for Syria, followed by UN Security Council [Resolution 2254](#), the [US and Russia](#) – main [promoters](#) of the new Vienna process – still [differ on the fate of Assad](#) and his role in the future transition. The US has also called for [de-escalation](#) of recent Saudi-Iranian tensions which threaten to [jeopardise](#) the peace process.

Humanitarian action

The US addresses the Syrian [humanitarian crisis](#) through: [humanitarian](#) assistance; 'humanitarian diplomacy' and resettlement of refugees in the USA. The US has [provided](#) over US\$4.5 billion in humanitarian aid since 2011 to the conflict-affected population inside Syria and in the region, and engages with states in the region to step up their aid contributions. The Administration also announced an increase in the global quotas of refugees in 2016 and in 2017. In 2016, the US plans to receive 10 000 Syrian refugees (from around 2 000 in 2015). However, due to concerns that Islamist extremists might enter the US, some state governors said they would restrict [resettlement of Syrian refugees](#) in their states, although the legality of this action is doubtful.

US military operations in Syria

Arguably the most visible part of the strategy is the US military campaign in Syria, entailing two aspects: airstrikes against ISIL/Da'esh and other [extremist groups](#) and training and equipping local forces. Russia's military involvement has complicated the US campaign, but some '[deconfliction](#)' [procedures](#) are in place.

The US airstrike campaign

Operation [Inherent Resolve](#) is the US-led military operation in Iraq and Syria, part of the global coalition against ISIL/Da'esh. As of 3 January 2016, the US has conducted 7 260 strikes in Iraq and Syria (2 977 in Syria), while the rest of the coalition has conducted 2 119 strikes in total. As of end-November 2015, the total cost of operations related to ISIL since August 2014 is US\$5.36 billion, with an average daily cost of US\$11 million. The initial focus of the US strikes on stopping the advance of ISIL/Da'esh forces and reducing threats to US personnel created a [rift](#) with some US allies in the region, who favoured striking Assad's forces too. Currently, US and coalition [military operations](#) seem aimed at disrupting the lines of communication in ISIL/Da'esh-controlled territory, denying ISIL access to the Syria-Turkey border and preparing for advances on its strongholds, including its declared capital, Raqqa.

The US military campaign intensified at the end of 2015. After Turkey's agreement on the use of its airbase at Incirlik, the US has deployed additional aircraft and increased the number of airstrikes. With [Operation Tidal Wave II](#) seeking to destroy ISIL/Da'esh-controlled oil facilities and tanker trucks, the US hopes to eliminate a major source of financing for the group. Additionally, the US decided to deploy around 50 [special forces](#) to Syria (and a 'specialised expeditionary force' in Iraq of [200 troops](#)) to perform various missions, including intelligence gathering and targeting the ISIL/Da'esh leadership. A significant US ground force (including within an international force) has been, for the moment, ruled out by the Administration, and the strategy is still to rely on local ground forces, arguing that in the long run, securing and governing Syria's territory cannot be achieved from outside that territory.

Train and equip (T&E) program for vetted Syrians

The Department of Defense's [Train and Equip Program](#) for vetted Syrians is the first such US programme destined for non-governmental forces. Congress approved the measure in 2014 for: defending Syrians against ISIL/Da'esh and securing territory controlled by the opposition; protecting against terrorist threats; and promoting the conditions for a negotiated settlement in Syria. Defending against attacks from government forces was not authorised – seen as a [reason](#) for the lack of 'candidates', who see Assad as their main enemy. The programme was granted US\$500 million in 2015, aiming to field 3 000 vetted Syrians in 2015, and a further 5 400 a year in 2016 and 2017. The authorisation for T&E expires on 31 December 2016. Following extensive failure ([reports](#) of 124 graduates in 2015, of which only 4-5 remain in the fight), the Administration decided to [reconfigure](#) the programme in October 2015. It will no longer focus on training new units, but on equipping and supporting [existing units](#) with air power; [vetting](#) will concern only the leaders of these militias, not all fighters. The programme remains directed against ISIL/Da'esh and not the Assad forces. For 2016, the Obama Administration asked for [US\\$600 million](#) for T&E in Syria. Prior to T&E, overt US [assistance](#) to armed opposition groups was limited to non-lethal assistance. However, the US has reportedly covertly provided arms to Syrian rebels. The US has provided non-lethal assistance to unarmed opposition groups since May 2012. The Administration requested US\$255 million in non-humanitarian foreign assistance to Syria (political, economic and non-lethal military aid) for 2016, up from US\$155 million in 2015.

The US Administration requested, in February 2015, a new Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) against ISIL/Da'esh, although affirming [the legal basis](#) for the military campaign was already in place. The draft AUMF excludes 'enduring offensive ground combat operations' and would be valid for three years after enactment. Congress has yet to [decide](#), as several concerns have been raised about the text. In his 2016 'State of the Union' address, Obama [urged](#) Congress to adopt the AUMF, in order to show unity and commitment to defeating ISIL.

The US strategy under scrutiny

The overall US strategy for Syria, Iraq and against ISIL/Da'esh has been criticised intensely, but consensus has yet to emerge on the most effective options. Critics denounce Obama's policy of '[strategic patience](#)' and [restraint](#) for failing to match the [geopolitical realities](#) and leading to a loss of US credibility in the region. Many also criticise the unwillingness to commit troops on the ground or to engage directly against Assad forces. Increasing [calls](#) for the establishment of a no-fly zone and/or [safe zones](#) to protect the Syrian population have been [rejected](#) by the Administration. On the other hand the Obama Administration argues its Syria policy is adequate, underlining the progress made in the fight against ISIL/Da'esh (although the group continues to hold [territory](#) and replenish its ranks of [fighters](#)): airstrikes have [disrupted](#) ISIL's command and control, their leadership and resources; and the territorial advance of Syrian Kurds and Arabs in north-eastern Syria with US support is also seen as a turning point in the military campaign. A [political solution](#) to the civil war, on which efforts to defeat ISIL/Da'esh are [contingent](#), is now the focus of US diplomacy.