

Peter Hitchens on the War in Syria: An Interview

I was reading [George Will on Syria](#). The piece consists of this: Obligatory reference to the Germans dropping chemical weapons. Wikipedia level knowledge of the types of weapons and a strained causal link to Israel's motivations in destroying Syrian airfield, completely oblivious of the greater strategic considerations. Mild Wikipedia level history to show that the gentleman author knows what he is talking about followed by a boring rhetorical question about a hypothetical situation of an airborne chemical attack on U.S. soil which will never happen because it is simply a logistical impossibility and U.S. remains the superpower for the near foreseeable future. That was followed by even more obligatory references to the U.S. failure to hold up deadlines, and culminated finally in a lament and a strained connection to rise of China, Rohingya, and Syria to the decline of Pax Americana.

In short, it was the typical (if not stereotypical) half-baked democracy promotion idea, the type of which [you can find on Politico](#) written by people who clearly are promoting one side of the agenda. Not conservative, not even Republican, but imperial in its instincts.

Unfortunately, some questions are not answered. Questions like: Who did the chemical attacks? On what motivation? What evidence do we require to intervene? Where is the independent proof? Why should we even believe the "activists," the white helmets, or the rebels who provide with the "evidence?" What of the factor of Russian deterrence? What is the intervention endgame? The intervention timeline? And, most importantly, what geostrategic interests do we (meaning the United States and the UK) have in Syria or the greater Middle East, other than balancing Iran—which to put it simply, the Saudis and Israelis are more than capable of doing themselves,

independently?

It also doesn't address the broader Western public disinterest in a new war or intervention. What we know, however, that the minorities of Syria, including the Syrian Christians, the Patriarchates of Antioch and all the East for the Greek Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, and Greek-Melkite Catholic Damascus, are [opposed to the rebels](#) and supportive of Assad. We also know that further [strikes against Assad are illegal](#). There are also [detailed studies](#) on how Rebels use [propaganda](#) aimed at Western media.

Not all Conservatives agree this time, however, as finally after 15 years of spending money on a toxic cancerous region, a kind of realism has set in. [Tucker Carlson, went on a phenomenal rant](#) on why President Trump should remember candidate Trump, on Middle East misadventures. In *The National Interest*, my colleague John Allen [Gay](#) gave a thorough run down on why it is a grave mistake for the United States to topple Assad. Similar conservative [arguments](#) are found on Syria, calling for [restraint](#), [realism](#), [skepticism](#) and [prudence](#).

I asked Peter Hitchens, the most prominent Conservative-Realist voice against any further involvement in the Middle East, on this side of the Atlantic to answer a few questions on the matter. Mr Hitchens isn't a [pro-Assad or pro-Putin apologist](#), nor is he a [believer of the "evidence"](#) that forms the basis of further intervention in Middle East. He has also [written](#) in detail about why, as a conservative and a Realist, [one should oppose](#) any wastage of blood and treasure in a sectarian proxy war between rival great powers.

Here are my questions and his answers.

Sumantra Maitra: You have been one of the consistent conservative voices opposing further Anglo-American interventions in the Middle East. What is the conservative

argument against further involvement?

Peter Hitchens: In political terms, it is the conservative argument against any “war of choice.” War invariably reduces liberty in the countries which wage it. This is already apparent, as an opponent of this war I feel besieged by a frightening conformity and genuinely fear limits on my freedom to oppose if this gets much worse. Access to major electronic broadcasting stations will, I think, be increasingly reluctantly given to opponents of the New Cold War, of which the Syrian conflict is an aspect. When I opposed the Iraq war I found that broadcasting invitations almost entirely dried up.

But fundamentally I do not think the arguments for this conflict pass the basic tests of a Christian Just War. And I am actually angered by the refusal to wait for hard evidence before acting. And I am amazed that so many educated people seem unaware of the experience of the ages, that alleged atrocities must always be treated with reasonable skepticism when they are being employed to make the case for war.

Maitra: How can we get out of Middle East, and why are we not being able to? Who’s pushing for us to be involved?

Hitchens: I don’t think major powers can “get out” of the Middle East, where so many are interested and clients are concentrated, and so many obligations have been inherited from the colonial past. But I do think we should rid ourselves of the idea that it is a problem, which can be solved by some all-embracing “solution.” Far better to recognize that no such ideal solution is available, and concentrate on ensuring that all may live under their own vine, and their own fig tree, in peace and prosperity.

Maitra: You have written that you don’t believe chemical attacks were done by Assad. Why? Is it a failure of Western media to corroborate the assumptions and accusations without

looking for proof?

Hitchens: I think I have written that the Assad state's involvement in these attacks is not proven by any material I have seen, a slightly different statement. This seems to me too obvious to anyone who makes an open-minded study of the known facts. I cannot answer for others.

Maitra: Russia is not the Soviet Union, but Russia is nevertheless an adversarial great power. How should we handle Russia?

Hitchens: In what way is [Russia adversarial, or, come to that, great](#)? It has in the past 30 years withdrawn from control over 700,000 square miles of territory in Europe and of even more in Central Asia. Its relations with its non-NATO neighbours, and also with NATO Norway, are generally good and harmonious. Its objections to the expansion of an explicitly anti-Russian military alliance right up to its border, in [defiance of pledges given to its Soviet predecessor](#), are reasonable and have been patiently expressed for many years, and ignored.

I do wish people would realize that in the era since the UN Charter, aggression has been done indirectly, either under humanitarian cover or through other semi-covert means, such as "people power" overthrows of governments which are inconvenient to great powers. The [2014 overthrow of the non-aligned legitimate Ukraine government](#) (and its replacement by a pro-NATO unconstitutional regime) by an openly Western-backed armed mob was an act of aggression. Russia's actions in Ukraine and Crimea were highly limited responses to this aggression. Russia possesses some unusable nuclear weapons but has one-tenth of the conventional military power of NATO and has a GDP roughly the same size of that of Italy which is not a great power. It has no global ideology and no global navy, as it used to have.

Maitra: You say you're a foreign policy realist. Do you think the European Union is turning into an empire, and if so, are there chances that it would be potentially adversarial to not just Russia, but also to the United States in future?

Hitchens: The EU has from the start been a postmodern Empire, based on the tactful granting of limited sovereignty to its subject nation (the trappings of independence, but not the real thing). The USA helped give birth to it, believing that such an arrangement would maintain stability in western Europe. It is in many ways an instrument of U.S. policy and I would be most surprised if the EU ever became a serious challenge to the USA.

But, as the continuation of Germany by other means, it cannot accept Russia as a member (unless it is first broken down in several much smaller segments) and is bound to be hostile to it. The Russo-German conflict, especially in the Balkans, the Baltics, Ukraine, and the Caucasus, is the main line of tension in the region and persists under all conceivable political and economic arrangements.

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