

An Analysis of the Interests of the United States in the Syrian Conflict

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Abstract: As the only superpower in the world, the fundamental interest of the United States in the Syrian conflict is to maintain its superpower status. Guided by this principle, the United States has important interests in Syria: Toppling or at least the long-term weakening of the Syrian Assad regime; Containing Russian and Iranian influence in Syria; Fighting terrorism such as ISIS to prevent Syria from becoming a terrorist base; Opposing the Syrian government's use of chemical weapons; Supporting Syrian Kurdish forces on the basis of not breaking with Turkey, etc. Interest is the unity of needs and means to realize them. With the development of the situation in Syria, the ability of the United States to fulfill its needs is also changing, which leads to the differences of its main interests in different historical periods of the Syrian conflict, not only in the content of interests, but also in the priority of interests. In the Syrian conflict, the constant changes in the important interests of the United States show that the United States is increasingly unable to safeguard its superpower status.

Key words: the United States; the Syrian conflict; Interests; Russia; ISIS

I. Introduction

Affected by the situation in North Africa in 2011, popular protests against the Bashar al-Assad government in Syria turned into a struggle between rival groups, which have religious, ethnic and ideological contradictions. Moreover, the internal conflict has been completely internationalized, and many foreign forces intervene in the Syrian conflict directly or through proxies. Russia, the United States, Iran, the Gulf Arab States, Lebanon, Turkey, Israel and some other countries are deeply involved. Today, while much of Syria is still outside the control of the Bashar al-Assad government, there is no doubt that the government is on the rise to expand its success and consolidate its position in power. Nevertheless, the conflict in Syria continues and continues at a high cost and risk.

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At a time when peace in Syria is still far away and the future of Syria is still full of variables, it is undoubtedly of practical significance to explore the interests of the United States, the only superpower in the world, in the Syrian conflict. Most of the existing relevant research results are limited to the “analysis” of the interests of the United States in the Syrian conflict, but the “synthesis” after the “analysis” does not seem to be enough. That is, there is no combination of “analysis” and “synthesis” to compare the relationship between their important interests and point out their differences in priority.

Different theories have different understandings of interests and national interests. Therefore, when discussing the interests of the United States in the Syrian conflict, we should first determine the concept of interests. In this paper, the concept of interest used here is the Marxist concept of interest, whose basic viewpoint is: interest is the unity of needs and means to achieve needs; one of the most important internal contradictions of interest is the contradiction between the subjectivity of interest realization requirements and the sociality of its realization ways; the essence of interest is social relations, etc. Accordingly, combined with Marxist dialectical thinking method, the author will analyze the interests of the United States in the Syrian conflict.

I. U.S. Fundamental Interests in the Syrian Conflict

The fundamental interests here refer to the interests of the United States throughout the Syrian conflict. Since social relations determine the realization of the interests of interest subjects, the essence of interests is social relations. Similarly, the state of international relations, in particular, the status of a country in international relations, determines the interests of a country and its prospects for realization. Therefore, the essence of national interests is international relations and the status of that country in the international community. From this we can see that the fundamental interest of the United States in the Syrian conflict is to maintain the status of the United States as the only superpower. After the end of the cold war, the United States became the only superpower recognized by the world. Since then, its foreign strategy has been mainly aimed at maintaining its status as the only superpower. Therefore, in the world, the United States tries to prevent the emergence of challengers that pose a threat to it; in the region, the United States often tries to suppress countries opposed to itself, especially regional powers against itself. At the same time, as the only superpower in the world, the United States also needs the sincere recognition of other countries, or the willingness of its small partners to listen to its leadership and command in order to gain international legitimacy. This requires the United States to shoulder considerable international responsibilities and to do something about the world’s major issues and regional hot issues rather than stand idly by.

Syria is a major country in the Middle East, but it is not a regional power. Despite its disharmony with the United States, it does not have irreconcilable conflicts with the United States, as Iran does, and it does not pose as great a challenge to U.S. interests in the Middle East. However, because the Syrian conflict involves a large number of countries and involves a wide range of contents (regional security, geopolitics, big power game, religious contradictions, ethnic contradictions, terrorism, refugee flows, weapons of mass destruction, international norms and other issues), the US is not and cannot be content to be an outsider or a sideshow to the

Syrian conflict. Therefore, guided by the fundamental interests of maintaining its status as the sole superpower, one of the fundamental principles of the United States in the Syrian conflict is to maintain a certain degree of involvement in Syria, which aims to safeguard the important interests of the United States in the Syrian conflict.

Guided by the fundamental interests of safeguarding the status of the sole superpower, the important interests of the United States in the Syrian conflict include overthrowing or at least weakening the Syrian regime for a long time, curbing the influence of Russia and Iran in Syria, combating terrorism such as the Islamic State, avoiding Syria becoming a base for terrorists and opposing the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government, and supporting the Kurdish armed forces in Syria, etc. According to Marxism, interest is the unity of needs and means to realize them. That is to say, interest must be a need, but need is not necessarily an interest, and only the need that is connected with production practice and capable or possible to realize is an interest. With the development of the situation in Syria, the ability of the United States to realize its main interests is also changing, which leads to the differences of its main interests in different historical periods of the Syrian conflict, not only in their content, but also in their priority. Under the guidance of dialectical thinking, the author explores the important interests of the United States in this conflict according to the different historical stages of the development of the Syrian conflict.

II. The Important Interests of the United States in Syria in the Early Period of the Syrian Conflict

The Syrian conflict was deeply affected by political upheavals in Morocco, Egypt, Libya and other countries in North Africa. The United States initially took a wait-and-see approach to the upheaval in countries like Egypt, where the three governments were not all friendly but at least not threatening. The Libyan Gaddafi regime, which had been anti-American, gave up nuclear weapons research and development on its own initiative to the United States in 2003. Egypt, led by Mubarak, had long been friendly to the United States and inherited good relations with Israel. But soon, the United States stood on the side of the opposition, abandoned its old friend Mubarak, and cooperated with its Western allies to provide direct military support to the Libyan opposition, overthrowing the Libyan Gaddafi regime beyond the requirements of UN Security Council Resolution 1973. For a time, the United States and other Western countries hailed the advent of the Arab Spring and welcomed the collapse of their so-called dictatorships and their replacement by new regimes based on Western democracy. In response to the collapse of the Gaddafi regime, President Barack Obama proudly emphasized in his speech that this shows the leadership of the United States in the world. Guided by the value of freedom over stability and based on the so-called “responsibility to protect” which is not universally recognized as an international norm, the United States has formed an inertia in supporting the overthrow of the government by the opposition in Libya and other countries, extending its support to the Syrian opposition. “In July 2011, Robert S. Ford, the U.S. ambassador to Syria, was sent to Hama, the Sunni city of Syria, where the old Assad ordered a massacre more than 30 years ago. According to the State Department at the time, the purpose of the visit was to express ‘our deep support for the peaceful assembly and self-expression of the Syrian people’.”^①

Given the political process in the three north African countries, the United States at the beginning of the

^① Christopher R. Hill, “What Does the U.S. Want in Syria?” February 21, 2018, <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/what-does-the-us-want-in-syria-2018-02-20>.

Syrian conflict was optimistic that the future of the Syrian Assad regime would be limited under the challenge of the opposition, and it regarded pushing for the unconditional resignation of President Assad as its important interest in the Syrian conflict. In addition, from the perspective of power politics, since Syria is an important part of the so-called Shiite Crescent, the collapse of the Syrian Assad government will undoubtedly weaken the regional influence of Iran, the arch-enemy of the United States. Russia also has close political, military and security relations with the Syrian Assad government, which is the pivotal country for Russia to exert its influence in the Middle East. Therefore, toppling Bashar al-Assad can also weaken the influence of Russia, America's strategic rival. In short, if the Syrian Assad regime is overthrown, it will help the United States to build new international relations and realize the interests of the United States. Moreover, in the context of the great changes in the Middle East, Turkey tries to play the role of an institutional model, and at the same time, to a certain extent, like the United States, wants to weaken Iran's influence, thus actively pushing Assad to step down. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab countries had been even more bitter about the close relationship between Syria and Iran, and wanted to get rid of it quickly after Bashar al-Assad did not agree to draw a line with Iran. Western allies of the United States, such as Britain and France, have also been actively pushing Assad to step down in order to consolidate the normative logic (if a government represses its own civilians, it loses legitimacy and should be overthrown) on which they overthrew Libya's Gaddafi regime. In short, both regionally and internationally, the demand for the overthrow of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria is considerable. In other words, the United States regards the overthrow of the Assad regime as an important interest, which is guaranteed on the basis of power, so this interest is not illusory. But the United States and its Allies argued that Mr. Assad must go, with the grand reason that he is not only a criminal who has lost legitimacy, but also an obstacle to an international political settlement and as long as he is in office, there can be no real reconciliation between Syria's political factions in a broad sense.

Syria is adjacent to Iraq, Lebanon, Israel, Turkey and other countries, and there were still more active terrorists in Iraq, and Hezbollah in Lebanon is listed as a terrorist organization by the United States. Therefore, as the conflict in Syria intensified, the United States was worried that terrorists would take the opportunity to concentrate in Syria, making Syria a base for terrorist organizations in the eyes of the United States, thus threatening the security of Iraq, which has long been tried to govern as a beacon of democracy in the Middle East. A chaotic Iraq would have a negative impact on the "soft power production" of Western democracy, which is not conducive to the foreign intervention activities of the United States and other Western countries under the pretext of "democratic peace" theory, thus undermining the interests of the United States. A secure, stable and sustainable Iraq is in the interests of the United States. Of course, the United States is also concerned that Syria's becoming a base for terrorists will threaten the security of its longtime ally, Israel. Because of the close ties between Hezbollah and the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria, as well as with Iran, when the Syrian government faces great survival challenges, Hezbollah guerrillas in Lebanon are bound to enter Syria to help the Syrian government meet the challenges, thus posing a certain security threat to Israel. Therefore, preventing Syria from becoming a base of terrorist activity was also an important interest of the United States in the early stages of the

Syrian conflict.

In the early days of the Syrian conflict, another important interest of the United States in Syria was to prevent the proliferation and use of Syrian chemical weapons. The United States is worried about the proliferation of chemical weapons in Syria mainly because it is worried that chemical weapons will fall into the hands of terrorists and threaten the security of countries such as the United States and its ally Israel. The United States opposes the use of chemical weapons in Syria, first of all, because the United States is worried that the use of chemical weapons in Syria will cause great harm to Syrian opposition forces, which is not conducive to the purpose of overthrowing the Bashar al-Assad regime; secondly, the United States openly opposes the use of chemical weapons in Syria in order to greatly weaken the deterrence of chemical weapons in Syria, so as to allay the doubts in the hearts of the Syrian opposition and make them feel at ease and boldly challenge the Assad government; thirdly, the United States opposes the use of chemical weapons in Syria for the purpose of showing off, so that the world can see the international responsibility taken by the United States as the sole superpower (to prevent a large number of civilian casualties and to safeguard the authority of relevant international systems and norms).

To sum up, in the early days of the Syrian conflict, the important interests of the United States in Syria were to promote the downfall of the Assad regime, prevent Syria from becoming a new base for terrorist activities, and oppose the proliferation and use of chemical weapons in Syria. However, during this period, the priorities of these three important interests of the United States are different. Promoting the fall of the Assad regime is the highest priority of these three interests, and opposition to the proliferation and use of chemical weapons in Syria is partly at the service of the overthrow of the Bashar al-Assad government. Preventing Syria from becoming a new base for terrorists is more concerned with the security of the United States itself and countries such as Iraq and Israel, and in a sense serves to overthrow the Assad government, because, as noted above, the United States also regards Hezbollah guerrillas, which are committed to supporting the Syrian government, as terrorist organizations.

III. Important Interests of the United States in Syria after “Chemical Weapons for Peace”

On 19 March 2013, a chemical attack was reported in a village in Khan al-Assal, Aleppo governorate. Both the Bashar regime and the Syrian opposition refused to be held responsible for the attack. At the request of the Syrian government, the United Nations planned to send a delegation to Syria to investigate the incident. However, as Western countries requested that the scope of the mission’s investigation be extended to Damascus, Homs and other cities, Syria refused the entry of the United Nations fact-finding mission.^① Nevertheless, US Defense Secretary Hagel and other officials claimed that the Bashar government was likely to have used chemical weapons in Syria, so the US government would strengthen its support for the Syrian opposition. Contrary to Western claims, Russia’s permanent Representative to the United Nations, Churkin, said Russian inspectors visited Kanassa and tested the samples in laboratories certified by authoritative international organizations. It was found that the

^① “Timeline of Syrian Chemical Weapons Activity, 2012-2013,”
<http://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Timeline-of-Syrian-Chemical-Weapons-Activity>.

chemical weapons attack was carried out by a branch of the Free Syrian Army.^① On 31 July 2013, a United Nations spokesman confirmed that the Government of al-Bashar, after months of rejection, had agreed to allow the United Nations chemical weapons verification team to enter the country for the first time to conduct its first inspection of three sites, including Kanassa, where chemical weapons were said to have been used. The United Nations Chemical weapons investigation team arrived in Damascus on 18 August 2013 to begin a two-week investigation in Syria.^② On 21 August 2013, while the verification team was conducting an investigation in Syria, there was a large-scale chemical weapons attack on the outskirts of Damascus. The intelligence services of the United States, Britain, France and other countries concluded that the Bashar government was responsible for the chemical weapons attack. As a result, the US government intended to lead its allies to carry out a limited military strike against the Syrian government forces. However, as the British House of Commons rejected Prime Minister David Cameron's proposal to authorize military action, only the United States and France remained behind the international coalition that supported military action against Syria. At the G-20 summit, U. S. President Barack Obama tried to call on other world economic powers to take action against Syria. On 6 September 2013, the United States and 11 G-20 member States issued a joint statement calling on the international community to take strong action to address this serious violation of international regulations and ethics.^③ However, Russia and other countries opposed action against the Syrian government, resulting in a stalemate in the United Nations Security Council.

As the United States Congress prepared to vote on whether to use force against Syria, on 10 September 2013, Syria, at the urging of Russia, agreed to the final destruction of its chemical arsenal under international control, and pledged to accede to the Chemical weapons Convention. On 14 September, Russia and the United States reached a framework agreement on the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons: requiring Syria to submit a comprehensive list of chemical weapons within a week; requiring inspectors to return to Syria by November; and demanding that all Syrian chemical weapons be destroyed by mid-2014. From 21 to 22 September, Syria submitted two lists of chemical weapons. Then, the United States and Russia began to agree on a framework text of United Nations resolutions. On 27 September, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical weapons (OPCW) adopted a resolution on the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons. The resolution endorsed the contents of the joint framework agreement between the United States and Russia. As part of the resolution, a team of 20 experts arrived in Damascus on 30 September and initiated verification activities in accordance with the resolution.

After the resolution of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical weapons (OPCW), the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2118 on the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons. Although the resolution stipulates that Syria will bear the consequences if it fails to fulfil its obligations, it has not been formulated in accordance with Chapter 7 of the Charter of the United Nations, so any use of force against Syria requires the adoption of another resolution.

① 王雷、裴蕾：《谁在叙利亚使用化武》，新华社联合国，2013年7月9日电。

② 倪红梅、王雷：《联合国化武调查小组抵达叙利亚》，新华网联合国2013年8月18日电。

③ 《美国与10国签署联合声明谴责叙利亚使用化学武器》，新华网圣彼得堡2013年9月6日电。

After the agreement of “chemical weapons for peace” was reached, Syria began the process of removing chemical weapons. Since before the agreement was reached, the United States and other Western countries concluded without any evidence that the Syrian government had used chemical weapons, which actually meant that the Syrian government had crossed the red line, the agreement showed that the Obama administration in the United States did not really want to use force against Syria. When the United States was unwilling to use force, its Western allies dared not act rashly. After the agreement on “chemical weapons for peace” was reached, Syria forged closer ties with Russia because, first, Syria agreed to eliminate its chemical weapons only after accepting a Russian proposal, which demonstrated its trust in Russia and gave Russia enough face; second, Syria has become more dependent on Russia for its security because of the loss of chemical weapons. At a time when the United States and other Western countries were unwilling to use force directly against the Syrian government, or when an agreement on “chemical weapons for peace” had been reached, the long-term nature of the Syrian issue seemed to be becoming more and more obvious, because with the support of the United States and other Western countries, as well as Saudi Arabia, Turkey and other regional powers, it was very difficult for the Syrian government to eliminate the Syrian opposition and it was also difficult for the Syrian opposition to overthrow the Syrian government without the direct military intervention of the West. However, after the agreement of “chemical weapons for peace” was reached, with the development of the Syrian conflict, extremist groups in Syria have also developed rapidly, and especially the rise of the Islamic State has changed the political pattern of Syria. In this context, new changes have taken place in the important interests of the United States in the Syrian conflict.

After “chemical weapons for peace”, the overthrow of the government of Bashar al-Assad was still an important interest of the United States in the Syrian conflict. Because during this period, the need for the United States to overthrow the Syrian government (as mentioned above, I will not repeat it here) had not changed, and in terms of the possibility (that is, the ability to overthrow the Assad government), it was also realistic to regard the overthrow of the Syrian government as an important interest, because the Syrian government had given up chemical weapons and its military capability had weakened, and still more, the West and the Gulf countries began to step up economic sanctions, political repression and diplomatic isolation against the Syrian government, and the Islamic State, a new force against the Syrian government, also began to grow rapidly in Syria.

However, after “chemical weapons for peace”, the rise of the Islamic State in Syria not only threatened the Syrian government and Russia, Iran and other countries, but also posed a threat to the United States and its allies. First, it's because the rise of the IS posed a serious threat to Iraq's security. After the overthrow of the Saddam regime, Shiite Arabs, Sunni Arabs and Kurds in Iraq reluctantly engaged in a fierce game within the framework of Western democracy. The Islamic State group had made effective use of the contradictions between the various factions in Iraq and the chaos in Syria, expanding rapidly not only in Iraq but also in Syria. The growth of the Islamic State posed a serious threat not only to the security of the Syrian government, but also to the security of Iraq. Because of its deep Sunni background, the Islamic State's growth in Iraq was even welcomed by a significant number of Sunnis in the country and was even regarded as a “liberator” when it captured Mosul in June 2014.

^① The anti-Shiite thinking and actions of the Islamic State further strengthened the centrifugal tendency of Iraqi Sunni Arabs towards the Shiite-dominated central government in Iraq. The rise of the Islamic State had also further strengthened the independence tendencies of the Kurds in Iraq. In order to meet the serious challenges of the Islamic State, the Iraqi government had to take the initiative to withdraw its troops from the northern oil town of Kirkuk, and the Kurdish local government took the opportunity to send troops to fill the force vacuum and seize the area and increased the economic capital for independence and autonomy. Western countries, and even Iran and other countries also provided weapons to Kurdish forces in order to stop the rapid expansion of the Islamic State. In stark contrast to Iraq's Sunnis, grand Ayatollah al-Sistani called on his followers to take up arms against the IS in the face of its attacks on Shi'ites. In short, the IS was making Iraq in danger of breaking up into three parts. Since the new Iraqi regime was created by the United States, the rampant of the IS in Iraq and the serious crisis it had caused to the country were bound to make the United States uneasy. Political stability in Iraq is essential to the stability of the country and the region as a whole, and failure to ensure the security of Iraq again will undermine the credibility of the United States and provide propaganda material for Russia. ^② In addition, the Islamic State was trying to break the borders of Islamic countries, publicly claiming that its next goal was to occupy Mecca. There was no doubt that it also threatened the security of countries such as Saudi Arabia, an ally of the United States. Not only that, the Islamic State is also hostile to the West, and the expansion of its power is bound to threaten the security of the West. Therefore, during this period, the fight against the Islamic State was also an important interest of the United States in Syria.

In addition, during this period, ensuring the smooth progress of chemical weapons elimination in Syria was also an important interest of the United States. But both fighting the Islamic State and ensuring the smooth progress of chemical weapons elimination in Syria were secondary to the overthrow of the Assad regime. Ensuring the smooth progress of chemical weapons elimination in Syria was in itself conducive to the overthrow of the Bashar al-Assad government, because it would not only eliminate a major scruples about launching armed attacks against the Syrian government, but also make Syrian terrorists more rampant. At the same time, it also made the United States and other western countries less worried to launch a possible military strike on Syria in the future. Moreover, Syria was guaranteed by international agreements to abandon its chemical weapons, which is the common responsibility of the international community, including Russia and China. While the rapid growth of the Islamic State was a serious threat to the security of Iraq, which was detrimental to the United States, it was also a serious threat to the security of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria, which had greatly reduced the effective control of the regime, thereby seriously undermining the legitimacy of its rule. Therefore, in Syria, the United States was absent-minded in the fight against the Islamic State, and the primary goal of the United States was to overthrow the Bashar al-Assad government, followed by the fight against the Islamic State. The United States wanted to use the Islamic State to seriously weaken the Syrian government, while also trying to use the Islamic State to weaken Iran.

^① Wladimir Van Wilgenburg, "ISIS Seen as Liberators by Some Sunnis in Mosul," *Al-Monitor*, June 11, 2014.

^② Alexander Brockwehl, et al, Syria and Beyond: Managing Russian Ambitions in the Middle East, Policy Workshop Final Report, Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University, January 2018, p.15.

The United States had achieved remarkable results in using the Islamic State to weaken the Syrian government. In the early days of ISIL's activities in Syria, its area of activity overlapped with that of Syrian opposition forces, mainly in the eastern and northern parts of the country. By the second half of 2014, the group began to expand strongly in central Syria, fighting government forces in many places. In this process, the United States took the opportunity to support the People's Protection Unit (YPG), the Syrian Kurdish armed forces. On the one hand, it took it as the main force to fight against the IS, and on the other hand, it took it as an important lever to influence the development of the political situation in Syria. Under the attack of various opposition parties and extremist groups such as the IS, the Syrian government forces were unable to resist and losing ground, facing the test of life and death. This policy goal of the United States, that is, to oppose both the Syrian government and the Islamic State, but the overthrow of the Bashar al-Assad regime taking precedence over the fight against the Islamic State, seemed about to be achieved. But in September 2015, Russia was invited by the Syrian government to send troops to intervene strongly in the Syrian conflict, sharply dimming the prospects for the achievement of US goals in Syria, forcing it to change its judgment of its own interests in the Syrian conflict.

IV. Important Interests of the United States in Syria after Russian Military Intervention.

Against the backdrop of the raging Islamic State, fierce opposition attacks and increased Kurdish separatist tendencies, the areas under the control of the Syrian Bashar al-Assad government were shrinking and its dominance was being questioned by more and more people around the world. After the "chemical weapons for peace" agreement was reached in 2013, there was a more common view that the Syrian issue would last long, but at a time when the Syrian government was teetering, some people began to doubt this view, saying that the Syrian issue would not last long.^① But the judgement that the Syrian issue would not last long had not fully considered all possibilities. On 30 September 2015, at the request of the Syrian Government, Russia sent military forces to Syria to carry out operations against the Islamic State. The Russian military action against terrorists in Syria had achieved remarkable results, and soon reversed the fighting in Syria. With the support of the Russian army, the Syrian government forces not only turned defense into attack, but also made major breakthroughs on many fronts. In December 2016, after government forces basically recaptured Syria's former economic center and largest city, Aleppo, it marked a complete reversal of the war in Syria. The Obama administration's goal of temporarily indulging the Islamic State to bring down the Bashar al-Assad government became difficult to achieve.

Interest is the unity of needs and means to achieve them. After Russia's strong military intervention in Syria, the Syrian government continued to recover lost territory and gradually stabilized its foothold. At this time, although the United States had the need to overthrow the Syrian government, it was obviously inadequate in the ability and means to achieve this need, because the United States could no longer overthrow the Assad

^① In September 2014, the author participated in the international academic seminar on "Great Powers and the political and Social Transformation of the Middle East" held at Shanghai international Studies University, at which a Chinese ambassador spoke about the situation in Syria. He made a judgment: the Syrian problem would be long-term. At lunch, the author talked to a scholar from Oxford University in the UK, who said he did not quite agree with this judgment.

government by means of agents or relying on the force of terrorist organizations, and if it sent a large number of troops to fight the Syrian government to overthrow the Syrian government, it would inevitably have a direct collision with the Russian army, which was not in the interest of the United States. Under such circumstances, the United States has to adjust its target position in the Syrian conflict, that is, to change its interest judgment in the Syrian conflict.

At this time, the change of the important interests of the United States was reflected in the fact that the United States no longer regarded President Assad's unconditional resignation as an important interest. As mentioned above, before Russia's military intervention in Syria, the United States had always regarded the promotion of the collapse of the Assad government as an important interest of the United States. The United States and its European allies accused President Assad of turning a domestic protest into a terrible civil war, without mentioning factors of foreign intervention, including the West itself. The United States believed that the Assad government was the source of the conflict in Syria, and therefore the biggest obstacle to the Syrian peace process and that under Assad's power, any peace process in Syria would not succeed. But shortly after Russia's military intervention, they weakened that position and expressed their willingness to let Assad play a "transitional" role. With the prospect of overthrowing him seemingly bleak, realistic pressure may have forced Europe and the United States to accept Assad's leadership role in Syria for a longer time.^① On December 15, 2015, local time, US secretary of state John Kerry visited Russia, saying that the United States accepts that the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's future should be decided by the Syrian people, a position that Russia has always maintained.^② Kerry's statement reflects at least a superficial change in U.S. policy towards Syria. Even if the United States does not really give up its goal of "regime change" in Syria, in the form of regime change, its focus has changed from the original means of force or military pressure to political means. At 5 a.m. Beijing time on December 19, 2015, the United Nations Security Council convened a ministerial meeting chaired by U.S. Secretary of State Kerry, the current month's rotating president, to discuss the situation in Syria. The meeting adopted resolution 2254 by a unanimous vote. The resolution stresses that the Syrian people will determine the future of Syria and supports the starting of Syrian-led political process within six months and the holding of free and fair elections in accordance with the new Constitution within 18 months. This was the first resolution adopted by the Security Council focusing on a political solution to the Syrian crisis in five years since the outbreak of the Syrian conflict.^③

In the absence of direct or indirect force to overthrow the Assad regime, one of the important interests of the United States in Syria is to try to achieve the goal of regime change in Syria through political means. The essence of the so-called "the future of Syria should be decided by the Syrian people" by the American leaders is to influence the formulation of the new constitution of Syria through non-force means, focusing on the use of

① "U.S. and Russian Interventions in Syria: U.S. Goals and Interests", Excerpted from *The U.S. and Russian Interventions in Syria: Room for Cooperation or Prelude to Greater Conflict?* Authored by Yoshiko Herrera, Andrew Kydd, and Fyodor Lukyanov, https://daviscenter.fas.harvard.edu/sites/daviscenter.fas.harvard.edu/files/US_Goals.pdf.

② 朱敏：《美国对叙利亚态度突然转变 允许叙利亚人民决定总统去留》，央广网北京 2015 年 12 月 17 日消息，http://china.cnr.cn/NewsFeeds/20151217/t20151217_520832482.shtml。

③ 《安理会 15 票一致通过：由叙利亚人民自己决定未来》，2015 年 12 月 19 日，<http://mil.news.sina.com.cn/china/2015-12-19/doc-ifxmszek7310954.shtml>。

relevant international norms, and force Syria to implement Western-style democratic system, thus slowly squeezing President Assad out of the core of Syrian power through the political process. In other words, although the United States has begun to agree to leave Syria's future to the Syrian people, its "future to the Syrian people" contains two basic meanings: First, the United States and other foreign forces will no longer force Assad to step down; Second, Syria should draw up a political development roadmap, including the constitution, in strict accordance with the western model. Otherwise, it cannot be regarded as "leaving Syria's future to the Syrian people". It is not difficult to understand that the United States and other Western countries have a negative attitude towards the Russian-led process of political reconciliation in Syria, dictating the composition of the Syrian Constitutional Council and trying to impose their will. The Syrian national conference, sponsored by Russia, Turkey and Iran, opened in Sochi, Russia, on January 30, 2018. The meeting decided to set up the Syrian constitutional council, with its headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, to focus on the drafting and reform of the constitution. The committee will draft a new constitution in the spirit of UN Security Council Resolution 2254. Some major opposition and Kurdish parties, such as the "High Negotiating Committee of the Syrian Opposition" supported by Saudi Arabia and the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Alliance Party supported by the United States, did not attend the dialogue conference.^① The absence of these political forces is clearly related to the United States, which is trying to regard the Geneva peace talks as the only legitimate mechanism for resolving the Syrian issue. On 27 September 2018, the Foreign Ministers of the United States, the United Kingdom and Saudi Arabia issued a joint statement urging the Office of the Special Envoy of the United Nations Secretary-General for Syria to convene the establishment of the Syrian Constitutional Council as soon as possible to begin drafting a new constitution for Syria, laying the foundation for Syria to hold "free and fair" elections under the supervision of the United Nations.^② At the same time, the United States continues to impose economic sanctions, political oppression and diplomatic isolation on the Syrian government. On November 20, 2018, the US Treasury issued a statement saying that any act of providing material support to the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria would be sanctioned. On the same day, the US Treasury announced that "sanctions will be imposed on three entities and six individuals from Syria, Iran, Russia, and other countries, on the grounds that the targets of the sanctions are involved in transporting Iranian oil to Syria via Russia"^③.

While Russia's military intervention in Syria quickly reversed the situation, its influence in Syria and the Middle East also expanded rapidly. Iran and its close ally Hezbollah guerrillas have also contributed a lot to Russia's military operations, and Iran's military influence in Syria has grown rapidly, with its military tentacles closer to Israel. Under the new situation, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and other countries have also shown greater interest in Russia. The US believes that allowing Russia and Iran to dominate Syria would provide them with greater power to shape the future of the region, which would pose a greater threat to the interests of the US and its

① 鲁金博：《叙利亚全国对话大会达成成立宪法委员会协议》，新华社莫斯科 2018 年 1 月 30 日电，<https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1591079216974744088&wfr=spider&for=pc>。

② 朱东阳、徐晓蕾：《美英等国外长敦促尽快成立叙利亚宪法委员会》，新华社联合国 2018 年 9 月 27 日电，https://www.sohu.com/a/256693664_115239。

③ 刁海洋：《美国宣布对叙利亚、伊朗、俄罗斯等国实体及个人进行制裁》，中新社华盛顿 2018 年 11 月 20 日电，<https://news.sina.com.cn/o/2018-11-21/doc-ihnyuqhi5460587.shtml>。

allies. In this case, curbing the influence of Russia and Iran in Syria is also an important interest of the United States. When it is impossible to completely eliminate the influence of Russia or Iran in Syria, what the United States should do is to take action to curb the further expansion of Russia and Iran, so as to ensure that the regional balance of power does not shift significantly in their favor.

In order to curb the expansion of Russia and Iraq in Syria and the region, the United States maintains a limited military and intelligence presence in Syria, as well as a backup presence in neighboring countries like Iraq or Jordan. U.S. military intelligence in Syria maintains contacts with opposition groups in the east, north and south of the country, including the Syrian democratic army, which is dominated by the Kurdish People's Protection Units, providing training services, money and equipment. The U.S.-led so-called counterterrorism coalition is based in Tamf, near the border between Syria, Jordan and Iraq. This would prevent Iran from exporting people and goods from Iraq to Syria and Lebanon. The United States also opposes Russia's attack on Idlib under the pretext of the so-called humanitarian disaster.

One of the most important internal contradictions of interest is the contradiction between the subjectivity of interest realization requirements and the sociality of interest realization approaches. As a result, the United States has also strengthened its cooperation with regional allies, such as Jordan and Israel, in order to curb the influence of Iran and Russia. In 2017, the United States, Jordan and Russia established a temporary de-escalation zone in southwestern Syria to prevent more terrorists and refugees from entering Jordan, and of course to prevent Hezbollah guerrillas and other Shiite militia from approaching the Syrian-Israeli border. The cooperation between the United States and Jordan is conducive to the United States' support for the Syrian opposition, such as the Syrian Free Army. The United States has worked with Israel to oppose Iran and stop Hezbollah guerrillas from invading and gathering military forces along the Syrian-Israeli border. The United States has been silent on Israeli cross-border air strikes against Iranian or even Syrian military targets in Syria. Although Israel's military action against Syria has dealt a blow to the Iranian and Syrian armed forces, it has naturally embarrassed Russia. Israel has actually done what the United States wants to do and dared not do, and has gained some face for the United States. Trump announced his withdrawal from the comprehensive agreement on the Iranian nuclear issue on May 8, 2018, and imposed two waves of sanctions on Iran on August 7 and November 5, respectively. Although the resumption of sanctions against Iran by the United States has been weakened by various boycotts, it is certain that the resumption of sanctions by the United States will have a greater negative impact on the Iranian economy. In doing so, the United States has not only indirectly curbed Iran's expansion of influence in Syria and the region, but also shown goodwill to Israel. Mr Trump's decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem is in part an encouragement and reward for Israel's efforts to curb the expansion of Russian and Iranian influence in Syria and the region.

The United States is not confident in overthrowing the Assad regime by political means in line with its will. However, as the only superpower in the world today, the United States must strive to ensure that it will not be marginalized in its future political development. At a time when it is too expensive to carry out large-scale direct military strikes against Syrian government forces (facing the risk of confrontation with Russian forces, and the

United States is alarmed by its military experience in Afghanistan and Iraq), the United States must find proxies in Syria in order to prevent it from being marginalized. Because the Syrian opposition is not United enough, its strength is dispersed, and many opposition groups are associated with extremists, the United States gradually weakens its support for a few Syrian opposition forces and strengthens its support for Syrian Kurdish forces. It would offend Turkey for US to do so, but it would also ensure its influence in Syria. Despite Turkey's opposition, the United States is more strongly supportive of the Syrian Kurdish armed forces not only because they can effectively help the United States fight against extremists, but also because abandoning it will send a harmful message to future American partners that the United States will abandon them when it deems it appropriate, and will also push it to the Russian and Syrian sides.

But there is also a bottom line for the United States to support the Syrian Kurdish armed forces, which is to avoid a direct armed conflict with Turkey. On December 12, 2018, Turkish President Erdogan said he would launch a new round of military offensive against terrorist organizations (in fact, the Syrian Kurdish Armed Forces) in the eastern coast of Syria's Euphrates River within a few days. The U.S. Department of Defense has warned that any unilateral military action is "unacceptable".^① Haley, the Permanent Representative of the United States to the United Nations, once said that the United States could withdraw from Syria only if it achieved its three objectives. The three objectives are: defeating the Islamic State; ensuring that chemical weapons are no longer used; and maintaining capabilities to guard against Iran.^② On December 19, however, President Trump declared that the United States planned to withdraw all American troops from Syria on the grounds that the "Islamic State" had been defeated and that counter-terrorism was the only reason for the existence of the United States military in Syria. Trump's decision to withdraw troops from Syria was strongly opposed by his allies, Britain, France and other countries, as well as relevant political forces and people in the United States. It is believed to be the last straw to "oppress" Defense Minister Matisse's resignation. This shows that Trump's decision is a difficult choice, but he does not want the United States and Turkey to break up completely. He believes that Turkey is more valuable than Kurdish armed forces. Trump hoped that the contradiction between Turkey and Russia would intensify after the withdrawal, because after the withdrawal, the Syrian Kurdish armed forces would lose their backing and would turn to Russia and the Syrian government in the face of the military threat from Turkey, while Turkey hoped to drive the Syrian Kurdish armed forces as far away as possible from its border and filled the vacuum with the Syrian opposition armed forces it supports and thus a standoff would take shape. The withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria is a process, not an overnight event, and President Trump's unique style of action does not rule out future variables. Foreign media said that US Republican Senator Lindsay Graham said on December 30, 2018 that President Trump had ordered a slowdown in withdrawal from Syria.^③ On February 25, 2019, Xinhua reported that "Trump approved the military proposal and agreed to leave 200 troops each at Tamf US

① 《美警告土耳其 勿对叙利亚库尔德武装动武》，《联合早报》2018年12月14日，
<http://www.zaobao.com/news/world/story20181214-915659>。

② Robert M. Danin, "President Trump's Syria Strikes Are Not About Syria," April 16, 2018,
<https://www.cfr.org/blog/president-trumps-syria-strikes-are-not-about-syria>。

③ 《美议员称特朗普放缓从叙撤军 巴沙尔授权伊拉克打击叙境内IS》，参考消息网2019年1月1日报道，
<http://www.cankaoxiaoxi.com/world/20190101/2367058.shtml>。

military bases in northeastern and southern Syria”^①.

After Russia’s military intervention in the Syrian conflict, Syrian terrorists were defeated, the resistance of the Syrian opposition was weakened, the Bashar al-Assad government turned to attack, and the influence of Russia and Iran in Syria was greatly enhanced. Therefore, curbing Russian and Iranian influence during this period is a top U.S. interest in the Syrian conflict. During this period, although the United States verbally claimed that it would no longer promote regime change in Syria and leave the future of Syria to the Syrian people for settlement, in essence, the goal of the United States in promoting regime change in Syria has not changed, but has only focused more on the use of political means. However, the United States does not have full confidence in using political means to push Bashar al-Assad to step down. In order not to be marginalized in Syria’s political development, the United States has to support the Syrian Kurdish armed forces, but in doing so, the United States will inevitably have a major contradiction with Turkey. The United States must give limited support to the Kurdish armed forces without a complete break with Turkey.

During this period, although the fight against the IS was once an important interest of the United States in Iraq, it was no longer an important interest of the United States in Syria. The anti-terrorism of the United States in Syria was mainly manifested by supporting the Syrian Kurdish armed forces, and to a large extent was forced, because the United States was unwilling to let Russia show off too much in the fight against terrorism.

Conclusion

The behavior of the state is guided by the national interest, and the behavior of the United States in the Syrian conflict is also based on the interests of the United States in the Syrian conflict. The essence of interests is social relations, and the essence of national interests is therefore international relations, because the state of international relations determines the realization of national interests. The fundamental interest of the United States in the Syrian conflict is to safeguard its status as the sole superpower in international relations. Under the guidance of this fundamental interest, the United States has a number of important interests in the Syrian conflict. However, because the national interest is the unity of the national needs and the means and capabilities for the country to achieve its needs, although the needs of the United States in the Syrian conflict have remained basically unchanged, with the development of the situation in Syria, in particular, with the rise of the Islamic State and the intervention of Russia, the means and capabilities of the United States to achieve its needs have changed and accordingly the important interests of the United States in the Syrian conflict have also undergone phased changes in content and priority. In the early days of the Syrian conflict, the interests of the United States in Syria were to promote the downfall of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria, to prevent Syria from becoming a base for terrorist activities, and to prevent the proliferation and use of chemical weapons in Syria. However, during this period, the priorities of these three important interests of the United States were different. Promoting the fall of the Assad regime was the highest priority of these three interests. After “chemical weapons for peace”, the important

① 王宏彬：《美国劝盟友别撤离叙利亚》，2019年2月25日，
http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2019-02/25/c_1210066529.htm。

interests of the United States in the Syrian conflict were to overthrow the government of Bashar al-Assad, combat the Islamic State, and ensure the smooth progress of chemical weapons in Syria, but the priority of these three important interests decreases in turn. After Russia's military intervention, the interests of the United States in the Syrian conflict are in order of priority: curbing the influence of Russia and Iran in Syria, seeking to peacefully force Bashar al-Assad to step down, and supporting Syrian Kurdish forces without a complete break with Turkey. The change of American interests in the Syrian conflict shows that the hegemonic practice of the United States is obviously inadequate. As Dennis Ross, a senior US Middle East expert, said: "the problem is not that we lack policy options in Syria, but that we do not know whether any of our policy options will produce a minimum tolerable outcome."^①

^① Rachel Brandenburg, "What is the US Interest in Syria?"
<http://trumancenter.org/doctrine-blog/what-is-the-u-s-interest-in-syria/>.