The US in Syria: A Realistic View of International Relations

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Abstract
The current civil war in Syria has taken a horrific toll on the population as well as the surrounding region, with United States (US) interest in the conflict growing. After a chemical weapons attack in August, 2013, the US government threatened targeted military intervention against Syria’s leader, Bashar Assad. The concepts that are characteristic of realist theory of international relations can be applied to both the events in Syria and examples of other conflicts in which the US has participated. Through this analysis, a pursuit of its own agenda rather than a desire to enforce international law can be considered as a primary reason for US involvement in Syria. While realism is not an indisputable explanation of the events, it is certainly a compelling alternative to other international relations theories. The idea of “responsibility to protect” as a legitimate international concept has also come into question due to the inconsistency with which it has been carried out, along with its use as justification for states’ personal objectives.
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On August 20, 2012 US President Barack Obama drew a “red line” for the Syrian government, saying that any use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime on his own people may result in military reprisals from the United States. After a period of escalation of the civil conflict in the Middle Eastern nation, chemical weapons deployment finally took place one year later. This prompted Obama to propose a military strike on Syria, supposedly as a response to the humanitarian crisis brought on by the Syrian leadership. These interactions between nation-states are explained and predicted with many different theories by scholars of international relations. In our increasingly interconnected world, I do not believe it is possible to simply rely on one of these theories to explain every action, but realism does go a long way to offering an understanding of the current conflict between the US and Syria. The realist perspective allows for a difference between declared intentions and actual objectives. Realists maintain that the quest for power, whether as a property of human nature as classic realists believe or as a consequence of the international system as neo-realists say, offers a convincing explanation of the actions of both the US and Syrian governments leading up to the current situation. Even though a modern democratic country would never concede that it is motivated by a quest for power and dominance as the true reason for a military strike against another nation, when analyzed against the basic concepts of realism, the actions of the US do seem to suggest just that. In claiming that its military intervention is motivated by humanitarian concerns, while disputing the authority of the United Nations to mandate such an action, the US allows itself to adopt the role of global protector while still furthering its own aims.

Historical Context

As with many countries in the Middle East, the relationship between the US and Syria has had a complicated history. The Middle East was largely overlooked in US foreign policy
until the mid-20th century when President Roosevelt declared in 1941 “the defense of ... the Middle East vital to the defense of the United States” (Ismael, 1974, p. 116). Having extended its sphere of influence through Eastern Europe in the wake of World War II, the Soviet Union began to look south and, in August 1957, in response to an accusation by the Syrian government that the US had sponsored an attempt to overthrow it, Ambassador Loy W. Henderson was sent to Syria and returned with a report stating his concern that Syria would fall victim to “international communism” (Ismael, 1974, p. 126). Soviet designs on the region continued to worry Washington and by 1970 it was President Nixon’s stance that “the United States would view any effort by the Soviet Union to seek predominance in the Middle East as a matter of grave concern” (Ismael, 1974, p. 116). In November of that year Hafiz Al-Assad seized control from his own Ba’ath party who had held power since the revolution of 1963, and, in a bloodless coup, established himself as the new Prime Minister and later President of Syria (Lennon, 2007, p. 63). Assad is credited as bringing “political stability” to the divided nation (“The World Factbook,” 2013) although critics indicate this was achieved through widespread arrests and assassinations of opposition figures and outspoken dissidents (Ziadeh, 2011, p. 28). After an escalation of unrest and subsequent violence from opposition (Lennon, 2007, p. 63), Assad resorted to bombing one of his own cities, killing somewhere between five and fifteen thousand civilians and arresting over 100,000 (Ziadeh, 2011, p. 29). Human rights organizations estimate that over seventeen thousand citizens were unaccounted for, and the Assad government’s apparent indifference to the cost left Syria with a negative international reputation as an “authoritarian police state” (Ziadeh, 2011, p. 29). Yet it was Assad’s foreign policy towards other Middle Eastern nations and not his questionable domestic tactics or his close relationship with Washington’s chief adversary of the day, the Soviet Union, which had a greater impact on Syria’s relations with the United States.
The UN General Assembly’s 1947 vote to partition Palestine was fiercely opposed in Damascus. Demonstrators attacked the embassies and legations of countries that had voted for partition, including that of the US (Rabil, 2006, p. 36). Through the following decade the Soviet Union and the US competed for influence in the region. As supporters of the Arab side in the Arab-Israel, the Soviet Union offered support to Syria economically and militarily (Rabil, 2006, p. 40). According to Rabil (2006), Syria’s policy of “positive neutralism” in the Cold War was reinterpreted to mean “seeking aid where one could, while continuing to fight western imperialism” (p. 41). Passage by the US Congress of the International Security Assistance and Arms Export Control Act in 1976 and Export Administration Act in 1979 stopped all foreign assistance to countries deemed to support international terrorism, among which Syria had numbered from the start, was the major reason for the cool relations between the nation and the US since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Rabil, 2006, p. 65-66). The “red-line agreement” between the US, Israel and Syria during the 1975 Lebanon civil war failed to do anything but exacerbate US-Syria relations after the US became directly involved in the Lebanon conflict (Rabil, 2006, p. 73). It was Syria’s decision to participate in the UN coalition against Iraq during the 1990-91 Gulf War which led to Syria being labeled "moderate", at least by the US, and opened it to economic investment. At this point, Washington hoped that a peace process between Israel and Syria could lead to an American dominated Middle East region (Gasiorowski, 2011, p. 289).

Bashar Al-Assad inherited power from his father on June 10, 2000. Lennon (2007) argues that Assad’s education and residence in the west made him “aware of the need to bridge the deep gulf between Syria and Western society” (p. 61). However, despite Assad’s attempts to modernize the state, Syria’s continued support for the Lebanese Hezbollah faction was a constant source of tension in its relationship with the US. Gasiorowski (2011) claimed that Damascus didn’t “adequately adjust” to the new US policies after September 11. After
the Iraq war, Washington accused Syria of a number of affronts, including hiding Iraq’s “weapons of mass destruction”, the destruction of which was the United States’ original goal in the war (p. 292). The passage of the Syrian Accountability Act in 2003 allowed various sanctions to be imposed on Syria by the US president (Fact Sheet: Implementing, 2008). As a consequence, relations between the two nations deteriorated further.

The Arab Spring protests and revolts that began in late 2010 spread to Syria in March 2011. The demonstrations soon became an open revolt against the Assad regime, and a civil war erupted (Jost, 2013). Assad pledged reforms in response to the initial demonstrations, but, while Assad did grant some concessions, violent clashes between government representatives and protesters ensued (“Syria – Complex Emergency,” 2012). Since then, multiple armed anti-government groups have arisen. Continued clashes between rebels and government forces have led to a formal condemnation of Assad’s response by the United Nations Human Rights Council. The death toll is now estimated to be as high as 100,000, with millions more displaced (Jost, 2013). International condemnation for the Assad regime peaked in August, 2013 in the wake of a chemical weapons attack on a suburb in Syria’s capital, Damascus. The United Nations inspection team confirmed the use of chemical weapons at the site (“Clear and convincing,” 2013). Though Assad has agreed to a proposal brokered by Russia to destroy Syria’s chemical weapons stockpile, he has yet to admit that his government was responsible for the August 21 attack (“Assad denies responsibility,” 2013). After announcing in August 2012 that the use of chemical weapons by Assad on his own people would potentially prompt military intervention by the US (Brady, 2012), US President Obama agreed to delay any military action to allow Russia to pursue its proposed diplomatic solution (Landler, 2013).
Realism explored

The frosty relationship between Washington and Damascus has historically been caused by the Syrian government’s support of opponents of the US, either in the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Cold War or the more recent “war on terrorism”. Because of this it is easy to assume that any military conflict between the two nations would be due to a US policy of increasing its power and influence in the region. This conclusion accords with the realist principle of hegemony. In his podcast, Common Sense, Carlin (2013) claims that smaller nations are resorting to the support of terrorism as a reaction to the perceived unassailability of the United States. As the current militarily dominant state in the world, the US must continue to enforce its dominance in order to maintain its position as hegemon. O’Reilly (2013) claimed the US, and President Obama specifically, looked weak in the Syrian conflict because they could have “pulverized his [Assad’s] military machine”. Instead, the US allowed Russia to broker a diplomatic solution, further compounding the loss of US authority on the international stage (para. 1). O’Reilly’s take on the situation may, however, be an argument against realism as a viable explanation of the conflict. The clear military superiority of the US over Assad’s Syria leaves the dominance of the US clearly unthreatened, so there is no need for a display of military power on its part.

It is this notion of power politics that drives the realist machine. In the realist view, foreign policy is the struggle for power and security, a struggle in which force, or the threat thereof, is the chief mode of achieving that security (Genest, 2004, p. 42). It is also the method by which states attempt to further their own interests in the international system. Realists claim that this rationale is derived from direct observation of human behavior. Every foreign policy decision that is predicted or explained by the concept is direct evidence of the objectivity or “realistic” nature of the paradigm (Freyberg-Inan, 2004, p. 5-6). Looking at the historical conflicts that the US has participated in it is easy to see why this view is so popular.
One of the US government’s justifications for the Iraq War in 2003 was the use of chemical weapons (of which Washington supposedly had undeniable proof) by Saddam Hussein. Hussein also used chemical weapons during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s, but with the full support of the US government, which had provided intelligence for key Iranian targets (Carlin, 2013). This inconsistency on the part of US governments over what constitutes an inexcusable act that requires international intervention strongly suggests that Washington is merely attempting to further its own interests and will use any amount of force deemed necessary to achieve its aims.

This use of force for the furthering of one’s own interests follow from the realist idea of an anarchical international system. Even in the increasingly globalized world we live in, the presence of an overarching international body able to enforce international law and guarantee a state’s sovereignty is debatable. In the campaign for approval to invade Iraq in 2003, President Bush dared the United Nations to “demonstrate its relevance by backing his plan for an attack” (Shabazz, 2013). The fact that the US went to war without the authorization of the UN gives credence to the concept of an anarchic international system. Until recently it did seem that Obama was ready to go down the same road as his predecessor. Richard Haas, president of the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations, claimed that “The U.N. Security Council is not the sole or unique custodian about what is legal and what is legitimate” (Charbonneau, 2013). Barring the failure of the Assad regime to comply with the terms of the Russian-brokered deal to destroy Syria’s stockpile of chemical weapons, which was the main reason given by the US President for the use of military force, any future conflict between the US and Syria seems likely to be explained by an anarchic system where the world’s supposedly highest authority is actually no more than a rubber stamp, to be obeyed or ignored according to what any state sees as in its own interests.
This anarchic system leads to what realists refer to as the security dilemma, a system by which the fear, mistrust and insecurity of competing nations leads them into a continuing escalation of armament in order to ensure their own protection. It is here that the compelling nature of the realist argument to explain the current conflict appears to fall short. The Assad regime is no match for the might of the US military, so why would the US feel the need to engage in conflict with an unthreatening enemy? Russia remains Syria’s most powerful international ally, supplying the Assad regime with weapons and equipment to continue the battle with the growing rebel groups (“Who is supplying weapons,” 2013), and defending the regime from formal condemnation by the UNSC (Gardner, 2013). Even though the US had stated its reluctance to give weapons to the rebels because of some of the groups’ extremist tendencies, on June 14 Washington finally announced “it would give the rebels "direct military aid" after concluding Syrian troops had used chemical weapons” (“Who is supplying weapons,” 2013). This change in policy came at least a year after US organizations had been suspected of operating in other Middle Eastern countries to help oversee US military support of the rebel groups (“Who is supplying weapons,” 2013). So with the US stand against extremist groups so widely known, how can Washington justify arming them? While Syria in itself can offer no threat to the United States, wider international implications of the civil conflict there calls forth parallels with the Cold War, with the US and Russia arming their chosen sides as proxy combatants.

It is assumed in the realist doctrine that all of these nation-states will choose their battles wisely; that is, they will perform as rational actors and only pursue goals which they have the ability to achieve. Given the incredible imbalance between military funding in the US and Syria, it is easy to see why the US would not feel the need to back down from a conflict with Syria; Syria would be crushed. Assad has, at least publicly, disagreed. In a meeting with Iranian allies, Assad is quoted as saying that “Syria… is capable of confronting
any external aggression” (Winer, 2013). This boldness can be interpreted as simple political posturing by Assad as the disparity between the military budgets of the two states can leave no one in doubt of the outcome of such a conflict. Given Obama’s declared “red-line” for US involvement, it is a wonder that Assad would have chosen to deploy chemical weapons at all. While it has yet to be proven that the regime was responsible, with Assad still denying his involvement (Winer, 2013), his statements about reprisals should the US wage war on Syria may leave some in doubt as to whether the Syrian state is acting rationally. In comparison, the US decision to avoid the conflict can be viewed as a rational policy given the impact that choosing a seemingly now unnecessary violent response would have on its international reputation.

While military power is the predominant factor in realist thinking, an argument can be made for the influence of popular opinion on the international balance of power. Realists argue that international conflict can be avoided through the distribution of power among multiple states or coalitions. At the present time, the military power of the United States cannot be challenged by any one nation, a situation which, according to the realist paradigm, would leave the world in a state of instability and possible conflict (Genest, 2004, p. 42). The fact that Washington chose not to undertake a military solution after their “red-line” was crossed illustrates that there are other factors at work here. US opinion polls showed that the majority of citizens, 51%, were against taking military action in Syria versus 36% in support, even after footage of those killed in the chemical attack was made public (Dugan, 2013). Pursuing a military solution in the wake of that much popular opposition, especially after the proposal of a plausible diplomatic alternative, would have left the leadership of the US under threat of backlash not only from its own populace but the international community as a whole.
This international community, in the realist view, relies on its own anarchic nature to realize and perpetuate a self-help system; one in which each nation state is essentially responsible for itself and in which there are no guaranteed allegiances (Genest, 2004, p. 44). Carlin (2013) makes a convincing argument in his analysis of the credibility of international law when he says of the US, and most other countries that, “We enforce international law when the violators are people we don’t like, and we don’t enforce international law when the violators are people we do like”. This analysis summarizes the fluid nature of states’ relationships and their instincts to form allegiances based solely on their own interests.

Brown (1995) goes so far as to argue that the cooperation that exists between states is actually an integral part of the self-help system (p. 380). Brown rejects the standard interpretation of realism in which self-help necessitates competition because of the uncertainty regarding another state’s true intentions or future goals. Instead, Brown argues that cooperative policies between states in some instances are more advantageous to the individual states, and, therefore, cooperation in itself is a form of self-help (p. 384-386). The United States’ attempt to build a coalition to assist them should they decide to take military action in Syria (Labott, 2013) here can be interpreted as using international cooperation to further one’s own interests in the region. However; as Policy Tensor argues, the United States’ interests in Syria are minimal at best (“US ‘Interests’ and Syria,” 2013), so why involve itself at all? The current conflict in Syria is a civil dispute, so does the US even have a right to intervene?

**Claiming Humanitarian Intervention**

The legitimacy of humanitarian intervention is hotly debated. The United Nations policy for the prevention of genocide establishes the principle that “Sovereignty no longer exclusively protects States from foreign interference” (“The Responsibility to Protect,” 2012). The Secretary-General's 2009 Report on Implementing the Responsibility to Protect
charges the international community with the responsibility to use “appropriate means” to protect populations from human rights abuses and to “be prepared to take collective action” should these crimes take place (“The Responsibility to Protect,” 2012). These mandates seem all too clear, but only insofar as the legitimacy of the UN as an international governing body is certain. As has been previously demonstrated, powerful states may choose to follow UN mandates only if those mandates are in accord with their own foreign policies. In this respect the US is a primary offender, as in the cases of its interventions in the 1999 Kosovo conflict and in Iraq in 2003, both of which were opposed by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC)). Each of the five permanent members of the UNSC - the only body technically allowed to mandate international intervention - has veto power. Each of these nations is motivated by their own political interests, a fact that makes determining the legitimate need for humanitarian intervention difficult. Reflecting an increasingly popular sentiment for US politicians, Waxman (2009) argues that the US “must be prepared to act alone or with others in urgent cases without Security Council approval” (para. 4). Many prominent realists agree that while the theory on the surface concerns the acquisition and use of power, moral considerations are not totally absent from it. The moral nature of man was an important factor for realist Morgenthau, who insisted that “a mature political science must combine utopian and realistic thought, purpose and analysis, ethics and politics” (Chang, 2011, p. 31).

It certainly is comforting to think that powerful states will courageously take up arms against any government threatening the rights of their own people, but the selfish nature of states makes this conclusion seem naïve. Baraka (2013) argues that the US uses the concept of humanitarian intervention as nothing more than propaganda to give “the U.S. State the perfect ideological cover and internal rationalization to continue as the global “gendarme” of the capitalist order.” The lack of any “independent confirmation” that it was Assad’s regime who deployed the chemical weapons in Damascus, and such similar cases as the supposed
weapons in Iraq in 2003, are strong evidence for the US simply using “R2P” as a smokescreen to advance its own “strategic objective” (para. 2).

Sustar (2013) echoes this argument by claiming that opposition in the United Nations is not the driving force behind the United States’ reluctance to engage in military action in Syria. Sustar suggests that American reluctance has more to do with fear of a political backlash if that military action were to result in a large number of civilian casualties (para. 16). Sustar goes on to claim that the sole goal of the US in any “humanitarian intervention” is the installation of a pro-western leadership in the state in question, in place of one which “reflects the opinion of the majority of the population”, as this could create problems for the US’ other allies in the region, namely Israel (para. 17).

The UN-approved agreement for the destruction of Syria’s stockpiled chemical weapons seems to have reduced the level of international tension resulting from the use of such weapons. Any intervention by the US at this point would only be justifiable should new evidence of atrocities come to light. Of course, should the US decide that intervention is necessary, history suggests that “evidence” may appear rather quickly.

**Conclusion**

Recent history does not present the United States as a paragon of virtue or as a state that steps in to selflessly protect the helpless from the perils of their own governments. While there can be no denying that US military power has overthrown many a dictator and freed civilians from tyrannical rule, it cannot be claimed that these actions were undertaken with purely altruistic motives, nor that there were not negative consequences in at least some cases. The realist theory of international relations may not be perfect, but I believe that it does provide the best lens through which to explain US government policy in the current conflict in Syria, a policy motivated by considerations of power and dominance. The claim that any US military action in Syria should be regarded as humanitarian intervention is an attractive
idea for those that claim to hold the moral high ground, but it is not necessarily valid. While human rights abuses are a legitimate concern in Syria, the actions taken by both the US and Syrian governments can easily be explained as the pursuit by both states of power or security in the international system. “Responsibility to protect” is definitely a noble concept but it is difficult to consider it legitimate if it is enforced at the whim of whichever state is dominating the international stage at the time.
References


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