

Obama's Iraq

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POLSC 250: International Relations

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March 23, 2015

Abstract

The Arab Spring was characterized by widespread protests across the Middle East. While several dictators could not withstand the voice of the majority, Bashar al-Assad has remained adamant. The conflict in Syria continues to attract global attention especially after the recent chemical attack on civilians. The U.S intention to use its military might to stop the crisis has been criticized for its lack of capacity to promote lasting peace in Syria and the entire Middle East. President Obama appears to handle the crisis in Syria just like how his predecessor handled Iraq. Judging from the outcomes of the military action against Iraq and Libya, the Obama administration is not telling the world how a military intervention in Syria will have different results. From a realist point of view, a military intervention in Syria especially without involving Russia would be counterproductive. Nonetheless, liberalism sees the need for such an intervention to promote peaceful coexistence. Conversely, the conflict in Syria can be solved by the working class uniting all groups by helping them understand that their class interests are common.

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The conflict in Syria is one of the current obstacles facing the prospects of peace and stability in the Middle East and the world at large. The conflict has attracted the attention of the international community given the significance of Syria in the geopolitics of the region. Despite previous efforts by the United Nations through the Kofi Annan's six point plan, the crisis in Syria is far from having an amicable solution. Hundreds of thousands of civilians have been killed while the neighboring countries struggle to deal with the influx of refugees from Syria. In the meantime, the United States has been supplying both lethal and non-lethal assistance to the opposition. Though military intervention was initially considered the last resort to the Syrian crisis, President Obama has recently expressed the need to wage a limited war on Syria. This position is in contrast with the views of Russia which proposes a non-military intervention. The recent chemical attack on civilians has greatly encouraged the U.S to opt for a military solution. Nonetheless, the aftermath of a military attack might be as catastrophic as that of the U.S-led invasion in Iraq or NATO's involvement in Libya. This paper discusses Syria as Obama's Iraq and the options available from a theoretical perspective including the legitimacy of a humanitarian intervention in Syria.

Historical Background of the Conflict in Syria

The civil war in Syria was triggered by the widespread protests during the Arab Spring in 2011. According to the CIA the protests started in a province known as Dar'a in the South and spread to almost every city. Nonetheless, signs of unrest in Syria were evident even before the Arab Spring. Syria has been under the leadership of al-Assad's family for over four decades. Besides the fact that Assad belongs to the Alawite minority group, the dominance of the presidency by one family was also a source of tension in Syria (CIA, n.d.).

Protesters were also calling for a repeal of the Emergency Law that had led to the arrests of many civilians without charge. Syrians also wanted local officials who were corrupt removed, and political parties to be legalized. Unfortunately, Assad's government responded with unprecedented force, which has led to the death of more than 100,000 people (CIA, n.d). With every violent response from the government, Syria gradually became radicalized as the opposition organized itself for war.

At first, the conflict involved the government-led forces and civilians. The civilians then gradually organized themselves to form the Free Syrian Army (FSA) with the help of the government of Turkey and Syrian army defectors. As the country became more and more radicalized, extremist groups emerged including those linked to the Al Qaeda network. The extremists slowly dominated the FSA. These "rebels" have split into various groups and occupied different parts of Syria. The east and north of Damascus is dominated by fighters that are more radical while the southern suburbs are occupied by fighters with more secular ideologies (Rankin, 2013).

Syria Seems to be Obama's Iraq

Since the conflict in Syria started, the U.S has been in the forefront in condemning the senseless killing of innocent civilians by Assad's forces. In the beginning, the Obama administration saw no need to intervene to make Assad go. In other words, the U.S was confident of a successful revolution to oust Assad as it had happened in other countries such as Egypt. As the situation grew worse, Obama made his "red line" remarks on Aug 20, 2012. In these remarks, he said that any movement or utilization of chemical weapons by Assad's regime would change the U.S course of action (Kessler, 2013). One year later, this "red line" was crossed after a deadly chemical attack was launched against civilians in Damascus in Aug 21,

2013 (Estep, 2013). According to the U.S government, about 1,429 people among them 426 children died in this attack (Hosenball, 2013).

Even before the investigations into the attack were concluded, the U.S was already contemplating a limited military strike on Syria. According to the Obama administration, this would serve as a punishment on Assad for the use of chemical weapons in contravention of the international law. At the same time, it would deter any further use of chemicals weapons while the U.S avoids getting deeply involved in the conflict (Brynen & Saab, 2013). In essence, the U.S is treading a path that would eventually trigger a full-scale war. Instead, the U.S should avoid a military strike and proceed with implementing the destruction of the chemical weapons if they are found. Moreover, the Department of State already issued a statement indicating that the U.S had given 10 armored vehicles to the U.S to facilitate verification and destruction of the weapons (Department, 2013).

The conclusion by the U.S that Assad is responsible for the chemical attack seems a bit rushed given that the UN investigations reveal otherwise. Carla del Ponte, a leading UN investigator, said that the testimonies they have gathered indicate that the “rebels” used sarin gas to launch the chemical attack. Several analysts have argued that Assad’s forces have no political or military motive to turn to chemical weapons when they can access more sophisticated conventional weapons to suppress the rebels (Cooke, 2013). The Obama administration through the Secretary of state has admitted that evidence gathered by the UN experts is vital. Nonetheless, John F. Kerry believes that the Syrian government is responsible based on conscience, common sense, and facts (Gearan & DeYoung, 2013). Unfortunately, the facts as seen in the UN’s preliminary investigations indicate otherwise.

The Obama administration seems to justify a military attack against Syria on unconfirmed evidence about who used the chemical weapons. This is what befell Iraq in 2003 when Bush suspected the presence of WMDs (Özdemir, 2011). Though Saddam Hussein had used chemical weapons against his own people in 1988 (Syria chemical...2013), the reasons behind the 2003 U.S-led invasion were unfounded. No WMDs were found in Iraq. Thousands of innocent civilians were killed or displaced, and Iraq became more insecure than it were before the occupation. Bush had won the war, but he had lost the objective of protecting the civilians and maintaining peace.

Obama might fall into the same trap if the decision to attack Syria is founded on logical interpretation of the chemical attack rather than concrete evidence of what transpired. Given that President Obama has been authorizing lethal assistance for the rebels in the form of guns (Sharp & Blanchard, 2013), it becomes clear that the U.S sees Assad's downfall as the only solution to the crisis. Such a view is unrealistic because those guns will only escalate the bloodshed whether Assad falls or not.

On Sept 24, 2013, the White House announced that the U.S government would give \$339 million towards assisting the civilians who have borne the brunt of the crisis in Syria. This announcement brings it to \$1.4 billion, the amount that the U.S has provided to Syria as humanitarian assistance since the conflict began (House, 2013). Although this is a wonderful step, it is a sad to hear that the President believes in supplying arms to "moderate rebels" to create peace (Cooke, 2013).

The reality is that the U.S cannot control who will end up with these weapons. In the event that Assad's regime falls, the weapons being supplied by the U.S will be in the custody of extremists. These are the people who will continue the bloodshed against those who supported

the Assad's regime as it is happening in Libya. The other outcome would be the full invasion and occupation of Syria by the U.S as it happened in Iraq. If the U.S has not learnt enough lessons from its occupation of Iraq, Obama will repeat the same mistake that Bush did in 2003.

In the same way that Bush ignored the UN regarding invading and occupying Iraq, Obama seems to ignore the UN concerning the dangers associated with a military strike in Syria. According to Cooke, there is logic to Obama's failure to heed to the UN. The Obama administration has been using the conflict in Syria to promote the credibility of the U.S foreign policy. The U.S handpicked a number of Syrian political exiles and presented them to Syria while pressuring other countries such as Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon to recognize them as the legitimate government of Syria (Cooke, 2013).

Nonetheless, Assad's resolve to hold on to power has humiliated the U.S efforts to promote its foreign policy abroad. Accepting defeat at this stage would make those countries that are helping the U.S, to lose trust and thus make it difficult for the U.S to promote its foreign policy through "regime change" politics (Cooke, 2013). Nonetheless, a military action would even be more disastrous to the U.S and Syria as it happened in Iraq.

Humanitarian Intervention or Humanitarian Imperialism?

The international community has often found itself in a difficult situation when trying to solve political conflicts such as the current one in Syria. On one hand, there are risks associated with exercising the responsibility to protect (R2P). On the other hand, any abuse of the R2P for political or economic interests can be disastrous for those who are meant to be protected. In most cases, nations invade other countries in the name of humanitarian intervention, but protecting innocent civilians is rarely their primary objective. Nations have used humanitarian intervention or the R2P to access valuable natural resources in countries such as the DRC. Territories have

also been grabbed while other nations have gained geopolitical advantage in the name of pursuing justice, peace, civilization, and democracy in countries or regions affected by civil wars.

Regarding the crisis in Syria, the U.S came in early with “non-lethal assistance” to the opposition elements. According to Cooke (2013), the term “non-lethal aid” has no meaning in a war situation because all military assistance directly encourages killing. The non-lethal aid then graduated to lethal aid in which the U.S has been trafficking tons of weapons to the rebels from Qatar and Saudi Arabia (Cooke, 2013). The Obama administration cannot use the concept of humanitarian intervention or R2P to justify such actions. If these weapons were not available to the rebels, thousands of innocent civilians would not have died.

When the U.S invaded Iraq in the name of protecting innocent civilians against what it considered a ruthless dictator, many people believed the idea of WMD. Both liberals and Republican leaders including President Bush have admitted that the objective of the invasion was to have control over Iraq’s vast oil fields. For example, Chuck Hagel, the U.S Secretary of Defense said “People say we’re not fighting for oil. Of course we are. They talk about America’s national interest. What the hell do you think they’re talking about? We’re not there for figs” (WashingtonsBlog, 2013).

These remarks were made in 2007 regarding the U.S involvement in Iraq. It is clear that Bush saw Saddam Hussein as an obstacle to finding a solution to the U.S energy dilemma (Leopold, 2009). The U.S did not care about the aftermath of the war which has been characterized by almost daily bombings of innocent civilians. Iraq is now divided along sectarian lines (Iraq's Humanitarian Crisis, n.d). It is appropriate to say that the U.S involvement in Iraq is a case of humanitarian imperialism rather than humanitarian intervention.

Libya is another case scenario that the U.S should draw important lessons before implementing any military action against Syria. The multilateral intervention in Libya has been termed by one founder of *Medicins Sans Frontiers*, Rony Brauman, as a “humanitarian coup d’etat” (Pitt-Rashid & Dominguez, 2012). Indeed, the main goal of the intervention was not to protect the civilians but to overthrow Qaddafi. According to the Amnesty International, civilian buildings were heavily bombed by NATO forces resulting in thousands of civilian casualties (International, 2012). Moreover, NATO ships failed to offer assistance to migrants who were escaping in boats (Pitt-Rashid & Dominguez, 2012). This inaction that led to loss of lives defeats the very objective of a humanitarian intervention. In the end, Qaddafi was ousted, but Libya was left without a mechanism to fill the power vacuum. The West has been slow in helping Libya achieve political and economic stability amidst crimes against humanity perpetrated by armed militias.

The U.S should appreciate that a similar scenario may occur if it decides to attack Syria. Overthrowing President Assad seems to be the main goal of the Obama administration. This is because the U.S seems to have no clear mechanism of helping the Syrian people avoid the misery that the civilians in Libya and Iraq are enduring. If the U.S strikes Syria, it would be shameful and unfortunate to hide behind the concept of humanitarian intervention or the R2P. It would purely qualify as humanitarian imperialism. In light of the blatant violation of the sovereignty of the people for political or economic ends, the legitimacy of humanitarian intervention as an international concept is worth investigating.

The Legitimacy of R2P or Humanitarian Intervention as an International Concept

One month after Gaddafi threatened to undertake a house by house cleansing in Benghazi, the resolution 1973 was adopted by the United Nations (Talec, n.d). This resolution

was meant to use “all necessary means” to ensure that civilians and civilian-populated areas were shielded from attacks by Gaddafi forces. In addition, the resolution allowed military operations including a no-fly zone to enhance civilian protection. The U.S, France, and Britain took the lead in enforcing the resolution before NATO took over a few days later (Talec, n.d).

Though the UN Charter prohibits the use of force under Article 2(4), the emergence of new threats and senseless killings has given rise to concepts such as “pre-emptive self-defense” (Talec, n.d). In addition, the “right to interfere” which has been modified into “responsibility to protect” or R2P has been controversial. The former concept is founded on the resolution 688 of 1991 (Henkin, 1991, p. 145). It only applies when human rights are violated on a massive scale to the threat of international peace. The Security Council then is justified to mobilize its members for intervention (Talec, n.d).

The R2P accommodates the circumstances and objective of the right to interfere. Nonetheless, it only applies if the international community has failed to prevent and stop violations of international law in a sovereign state. R2P was established during the 2005 UN world summit (Bannon, 2006). Precisely, it stipulates that the sovereign State has the full responsibility of protecting populations from war crimes, ethnic cleansing, genocide, and crimes against humanity. In addition, the international community may use humanitarian and diplomatic means to assist the sovereign State in fulfilling this responsibility (Glanville, 2012).

R2P also stipulates that only appropriate humanitarian, diplomatic, and other peaceful channels should be used by the international community to protect populations. The R2P allows the international community to consider other stronger measures such as military action via the UN Security Council if three scenarios clearly present themselves. The first scenario is when a State is unwilling to protect civilians from the above mentioned crimes. The second scenario is

when a State fails to protect its populations. Thirdly, stronger measures may be considered if the State is the perpetrator of these crimes (Talec, n.d).

Regarding the situation in Syria, there is no doubt that human rights are being violated on a massive scale. Moreover, the government of Syria is unwilling and has failed to protect its populations against war crimes and crimes against humanity. The situation is even worse because the government is killing its own people. It is appropriate to say that the conflict in Syria has satisfied the conditions for the R2P to apply. In this respect, the U.S is not mistaken in its proposal for military action to stop human rights violations in Syria. Nonetheless, its motive of striking Syria is questionable given that its supply of arms to the rebels has caused more chaos.

The legitimacy of R2P cannot be based on the fact that it is contained in the UN Charter. It must go beyond this and offer practical guidelines by ensuring that nations do not use the R2P for their political or economic ambitions. If Libya was used as a litmus test for the R2P framework, the UN should go back to the drawing board and see how future interventions could be more effective. Individual nations such as the U.S should convince the Security Council that a humanitarian intervention in the form of a military strike will bring peace and stability in Syria. This is the only way to make the R2P or humanitarian intervention have legitimacy as an international concept. As at now, the outcomes of previous “humanitarian interventions” in Iraq, Libya, and Afghanistan deny the R2P its legitimacy. Nevertheless, a theoretical understanding of the crisis in Syria offers the U.S and indeed the international community an opportunity to redeem the legitimacy of humanitarian intervention.

The Conflict in Syria from a Theoretical Perspective

The realist theory adequately explains the international conflict that is unfolding in Syria. From a realist point of view, each country is interested in its security and power. Realism

upholds the notion that power enables a country to regulate peace (Kolin, 2007). The U.S is intent on intervening in Syria in order to gain more power and influence in the Middle East. Realism does not advocate for military action. Rather, any intervention that will culminate in a nation gaining more power and influence over a region is good.

From the perspective of a realist, the U.S no doubt wants Assad to lose the presidency. This will reduce Iran's power and influence and thus weaken its prospects of becoming the regional hegemon. Given that Iraq is no longer in the equation of the balance of power in the region, Iran's ambitions need to be kept in check. Isolating Iran is the only way of reducing its influence over non-state and state actors in the region. Since Iran uses Syria to extend its assistance to Hezbollah, overthrowing the current regime with the help of the U.S will make it difficult for Iran to use Hezbollah to antagonize the U.S, Israel, and Europe (Gerschwer, n.d). Nonetheless, a repeat of what happened in Iraq might enhance Iran's power and compromise the interests of the U.S.

A military intervention by the U.S is not a realistic solution. Rather, diplomacy as proposed by Russia and the UN including economic sanctions and other tactics are imperative (Maller, 2013). The U.S can increase its power and manage to discourage Iran's ambitions by working closely with Russia. Russia is a close ally of Syria, but its position can change if the rebels show real signs of ousting Assad. The U.S may continue to supply arms to the rebels, but it cannot intervene militarily. By working with Russia, the U.S will be seen more as a partner than a rival in the region. In fact, Russia may push Assad to his exit if the U.S continues to resist the urge to intervene while the rebels show signs of winning. This collaboration may also bring Russia closer to the U.S position regarding Iran (Gerschwer, n.d).

Nevertheless, the U.S should have a mechanism of convincing Russia to help Syria hold free elections once Assad is gone. If a power vacuum is left in Syria, the situation will be more chaotic as extremist groups try to gain power and leadership. Iraq was a misadventure because the U.S was guided by neo-conservative and unrealistic ideologies. Syria is another tricky crisis that must be handled realistically. Iran is watching closely to see whether the U.S will use the excuse of chemical weapons to attack Syria. It is worth noting that Gaddafi gave up his quest for nuclear weapons, while Saddam' alleged WMDs were never found. Nonetheless, they are both dead. If the U.S now decides to attack another Middle Eastern country which has no nuclear weapons, Iran will become more determined to get the ultimate deterrent: nuclear weapons (Gerschwer, n.d).

From a realist point of view, the U.S would make Iran feel more secure by not launching a military strike against Syria. Consequently, Iran may relinquish its quest for nuclear weaponry (Gerschwer, n.d). All these outcomes will serve the purpose of promoting the credibility of the U.S foreign policy. At the same time, the goal of gaining more power and influence as envisioned by the realist theory will be achieved. The decision by the Obama administration to delay a military strike to allow the Russian proposal for a peaceful settlement of the Syrian crisis is a step in the right direction.

Alternative Theories

Liberalism

This theory goes beyond regarding states as the main actors to include different organizations such as social movements and businesses. Liberalism advocates for social progress through changing laws and reforming institutions rather than engaging in a revolution. Liberalism takes into account the social, political, and economic interdependence as

opportunities for peaceful co-existence (Rowse, n.d). In this regard, the conflict in Syria is a threat to this interdependence especially if the U.S does not intervene. Though there are no strong trade links between Syria and the U.S, the fall of Assad would weaken a reliable ally of Iran. This would reduce chances of conflict between the U.S and Iran while suppressing the threat of Hezbollah on Israel.

Class system theory

The conflict in Syria can be viewed as a class struggle. According to class system theory, any capitalist society will experience conflicts at one time or another as people try to pursue their class interests. Since human relationships are largely shaped by their ability to access power and resources, this has created a struggle between classes (Stapley, 2010). Syria is a differentiated society and the current conflict is a manifestation of inherent class struggles between exploiters and the exploited. Unfortunately, the opposition has been weakened by what the government wants the world to see as sectarianism.

Though the opposition is clear on its motive to oust Assad so that they can gain power, it has given room for sectarian sentiments to divide it and make it weak. The conflict has escalated because of the class divisions among the majority Sunni as well as the minority groups. The working class has an opportunity to mobilize the minority and the majority Sunni by organizing mass strikes. By using its social power, the working class can unite Christians, Alawis, Druze, Sunnis among other groups through shared class demands. This approach has the potential to turn the tables on Assad and prevent manipulations from external powers. Ultimately, the conflict can be solved in a manner that favors the people (Maunder, 2012).

Conclusion

Since the conflict in Syria started, the U.S has continued to demonstrate its interest due to the significance of Syria in the geopolitics of the Middle East. Despite warnings from the UN and political analysts that military action will worsen the conflict, the U.S has not completely abandoned this option. Indeed, Syria seems to be Obama's Iraq given the circumstances that have prompted a military strike and the possible outcomes of such an action. Nonetheless, the outcomes of U.S intervention in Iraq and Libya makes it appear like another imminent humanitarian imperialism as opposed to humanitarian intervention. Moreover, the legitimacy of humanitarian intervention or the R2P has not been established in practice. The R2P is exercised to protect the civilians of a sovereign state. This goal was not achieved in Iraq and Libya. According to the realist theory, a military strike against Syria is highly unlikely to serve the interests of America. Engaging Russia in the search for a diplomatic solution in Syria is a more realistic alternative for the U.S. This is contrary to liberalism theory which sees intervention as the best way to protect the value of interdependence between states. Another alternative is class system theory that advocates for a united front by all groups in Syria led by the working class.

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