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Abstract

Syria has been locked in a civil war for over a decade, with thousands of people dead, many of them civilians. The Syrian Civil War has caused a humanitarian crisis, drawing the attention of international humanitarian aid actors and now the United States. After a chemical weapons attack against the Syrian civilians by the Assad Regime, former Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump led punitive strikes against the Syrian government. After years of the United States weaving in and out of the Syrian crisis, the time has come for international actors to carefully analyze the intentions of the United States.

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Brynn M. Mitoraj

Introduction

Syria has been locked in a civil war for over a decade, with thousands of people dead, many of them civilians. The Syrian Civil War has caused a humanitarian crisis, drawing the attention of international humanitarian aid actors and now the United States. After a chemical weapons attack against the Syrian civilians by the Assad Regime, former Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump led punitive strikes against the Syrian government. After years of the United States weaving in and out of the Syrian crisis, the time has come for international actors to carefully analyze the intentions of the United States.

When foreign nations involve themselves in the conflicts of other countries, it is important to question their intentions. Because of this concern, the theoretical approach employed in this essay will be that of a realist approach. For this essay, the *realist theoretical approach* is defined as one in which “the principal actors in the international arena to be states, which are concerned with their own security, act in pursuit of their own national interests, and struggle for power” (Korab-Karpowicz, 2017, para. 1). Is the United States justified in intervening, especially in ways that are violent, punitive, and retributive? If the Syrian Regime, with the help of Russia, has been terrorizing its citizens, are these actions at all justifiable?

Who is involved in this decade-long conflict? The United States, Russia, the Assad Regime, and ISIS will be the actors discussed in this essay. The Assad Regime has been at war with the Syrian Rebels for years now, and Russia and the United States’ self-involvement complicates the matter further. ISIS’ involvement only serves to make the situation more

insecure and has also provided a bigger incentive for the United States to involve itself (“A timeline,” 2019, para. 13).

The relationship between The Assad Regime and the United States will be the main focus of this essay. While all of the relationships are incredibly important, the chemical attacks of the Assad Regime against the citizens of Syria is what prompted the action of the United States. Another relationship that will be discussed is the relationship between the United States and ISIS. The terrorist attacks against Syrian citizens were used as justification for the United States to intervene (“A timeline,” 2019, para. 13). The relationship between the Assad Regime and Russia will be discussed as well, although, for this essay, it will be discussed briefly. This paper will not extend beyond the relationships between the actors listed. It will detail the chemical warfare that caused the United States to involve itself and how the actors listed above have interacted with each other in their attempts to allegedly help or harm each other.

Are Russia and the United States acting in a productive manner? From a foreign policy perspective, it is not clear whether or not the United States is acting destructively. Russia’s actions are much more harmful because of President Putin’s association with Bashar-Al-Assad, who is to blame for the chemical weaponry that will be the main focus of this essay.

Literature Review

Some sources were used to develop a timeline of the relationship between the United States and actors in Syria, the Assad Regime, the Kurds, and Russia. The start of chemical warfare was the impetus for the United States’ decision to strike the Assad Regime itself, so that is where the analysis will begin (“A timeline,” 2019, para. 17). The discussion will extend to the beginning of the Trump Administration’s withdrawal from Syria. While the United States may be justified in their attack against Syria after their illegal use of chemical weapons, the quick exit of the United

States left the Kurds and the Syrians incredibly vulnerable (“Donald Trump’s,” 2019, para.2). In order to remedy this and protect civilians and the Kurds who fought on the side of the United States, military intervention would be necessary and justified if it were to be done responsibly.

According to an article written for the Associated Press, the turning point for the United States to draw the line and choose to involve itself was Bashar al-Assad’s decision to use chemical warfare against his citizens, some of them children. Former President Barack Obama famously described this heinous attack as “The Red Line” because it was where the United States drew the line and could no longer ignore the injustices against the citizens (“A timeline,” 2019, para. 9).

After hundreds of people were killed, the United Nations stepped in and determined that the missile attack from the Syrian government killed them. The United States once again directly blamed Syria for the missile attack. However, because of the lack of support from Congress, President Barack Obama was unable to strike against the Assad Regime. After shifting his focus from the Assad Regime to ISIS, Obama was able to launch an airstrike campaign. The United States troops went into Syria in 2015, growing in numbers until they reached 2,000. In an attempt to rid Syria of ISIS terrorists, the United States trained Kurdish soldiers. President Obama’s involvement in Syria ended with the death of an American soldier whom ISIS killed in an explosive attack (“A timeline,” 2019, para. 10-15).

The start of the Trump Administration’s involvement in Syria began with the killing of 90 people in a chemical attack. The United States assumed that Bashar al-Assad was to blame for this attack, and former President Donald Trump was starting to show signs that he was losing patience with the Assad Regime. President Trump led an attack against the Syrian government, the first of its kind. Unlike the attack in Syria by former President Obama

directed at ISIS, this attack was directed at the government. Fifty-nine cruise missiles were fired by the United States, directed at Syria and Assad. Even after this punitive strike, the chemical attacks did not end. Forty more people were killed in a chemical attack, though Bashar al-Assad rejected the idea that he was to blame. The United States received international support for the punitive strike and was later joined by England and France in an attack against Damascus (“A timeline,” 2019, para. 16-21).

Later that year, Donald Trump decided the United States had to get involved. Even without a clear resolution, President Trump posted to Twitter that he was planning to bring the American troops back to the United States. This would leave the Kurdish troops who had sided with the United States alone and unprotected; despite protests coming from United States officials, the American military started to withdraw within a month (“A timeline,” 2019, para. 22-26).

“The Responsibility to Protect” Doctrine from 2017 is also cited throughout this essay. It is used to thoroughly analyze why the United States should intervene in the Syrian crisis. The Responsibility to Protect Doctrine creates a standard where the international community takes on responsibility to protect vulnerable groups of people who are victims of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and more. The Responsibility to Protect is described as “a solemn pledge that [the international community] cannot lightly ignore” (“Responsibility to Protect,” 2017, section 1, para. 6). Sovereignty is an important issue for the international community to consider when it comes to deciding whether or not to intervene, but the Responsibility to Protect is a promise to intervene in dire situations despite the sovereignty of other countries.

Analysis

Was the Trump Administration's direct attack against the Assad Regime justified? Many countries, including Britain, Spain, and France, think so. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization also supported the United States strike. Russia was against the United States taking action, but this does not surprise because Russia had also blocked a Security Council decision to stop chemical weapons in Syria (Eran, & Rosner, 2017, para. 1-3).

The rest of Europe was relatively pleased that the United States took direct action against the Assad Regime. It is important to remember that when former President Obama utilized airstrikes in Syria, they were directed towards ISIS. The Trump Administration's action against Assad and the capital was well-received because this was an extreme circumstance. As discussed in the "Implications for Policy" section, the Responsibility to Protect Doctrine could have provided more peace of mind for those who do not believe in such strong military action. Because Assad was using illegal chemical weapons against the people of Syria, many European states stood by the Trump Administration's decision to intervene (Eran, & Rosner, 2017, para. 1-3).

President Donald Trump viewed the United States' involvement in Syria as almost unnecessary. In a true realist fashion, he did not believe the United States had much reason to involve itself. Only after the use of chemical weapons did he feel the need to react with military action for humanitarian reasons. President Donald Trump said America must stop becoming involved with wars such as this one, especially when the United States does not particularly have anything to gain from intervening ("Donald Trump's," 2019, para.3).

The United States pulling out of Syria had detrimental consequences for the Syrians and the Kurds whom the United States had trained to fight for the Syrian civilians and the American

side. The Kurdish fighters who died for this cause numbered around 11,000, and they were abandoned. President Trump quickly withdrew American involvement, leaving the Kurds high and dry after risking their lives for the same cause (“Donald Trump’s,” 2019, para.6). President Trump had promised to keep American troops in Syria until ISIS was gone and the Kurds were protected, a promise he broke shortly after (“A timeline,” 2019, para. 24).

President Trump damaged the United States’ credibility by breaking his promise to the Kurds, and he put them in imminent danger. The United States is to blame for the Turkish attack against the Kurds because the president did not keep his promise to protect them. ISIS backers are now running rampant because they are no longer being guarded by the Kurds, and the Kurds are turning to the Assad Regime for assistance and to join Bashar-al-Assad’s cause (“United States,” 2020, para. 1).

With the United States pulling out of Syria, Russia will be the only major superpower left in the Assad Regime. It is already difficult for the United Nations to accomplish anything with Russia’s strong influence and economic power. The President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, will be in charge of the most prominent world power involved with Syria. President Putin’s continuous choice to support Bashar al-Assad and his heinous conduct is an example of why the United States should not make any space for Russia in Syria. Assad will continue to owe a debt to Russia for President Vladimir Putin’s involvement, further cementing their dangerous relationship for the future. According to an article written for *The Economist*, this is not a debt likely to go away anytime soon. “[Bashar al-Assad] owes his victory to their supply of firepower, advice, and money and their willingness to back a pariah. They will expect to be paid, with interest” (The Economist, 2019, para. 7).

Both Russia and the United States’ involvement in Syria are strong examples of the realist

perspective. The United States has provided other forms of aid to Syria but ultimately chose to pull American troops out of Syria because President Donald Trump saw little to no benefit in the United States' involvement. If the United States had chosen to involve itself for purely humanitarian reasons, perhaps President Donald Trump would not have been so quick to pull out troops.

Meanwhile, Russia has much to gain from its involvement in Syria. Russia is determined to show the international community that it is a major world power. The Russian government does not have any faith in the Assad Regime and what it can do. "They were thinking not in the interests of Syria, but in their own interests" (Rahman-Jones, 2017, section 3). Russia is using Syria to show they have military power, not just within their own country but throughout the entire international community (Rahman-Jones, 2017, section 4).

Russia's exportation of arms is incredibly important to President Vladimir Putin, who sees potential customers in Syria. Russia had plans during the Arab Spring to export arms to Libya, and when that fell through, Russia knew it had to search for customers elsewhere. Russia, in the 1970s, provided Syria with aid and arms. Russia saw the opportunity to sell arms to them once again, which required them to rebuild their relationship with Syria (Rahman-Jones, 2017, sections 2-4).

The selfishness of the United States and Russia will not end well for Syria. The abandonment of the Kurds by the United States left an entire group of people, who were fighting on the side of the Americans, vulnerable because the United States government no longer thought it was worth it to keep troops in Syria. There are currently troops in Syria under the Biden administration, but it is unknown how long they will be there. It is also important to note that a lot of these troops are being sent to stop ISIS as opposed to the Assad Regime. Robert

Ford was the ambassador in Syria under Obama's presidency and does not believe that the U.S. troops involving themselves in Syria is worth it. He said that the threat of ISIS "is largely contained and not in a position to threaten the U.S. homeland or even to send fighters to Europe" (Cloud, 2021, paragraph 9).

Implications for Policy

Where can the United States go from here? Both former Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump involved the United States in the Syrian crisis after the chemical attacks against the citizens. What does the future look like for United States involvement? Former President Obama launched attacks to justify ending the terrorist reign of ISIS, while former President Trump launched attacks against the Assad regime itself. The end of terrorism in Syria is eminently important, "focus must be placed on the threat posed by the terrorist organization to the attacking nation-State and surrounding international body" (Jackson, 2015, page 194). Regardless, the end of Bashar al-Assad's regime should be a major focus. There were no real solutions after those attacks, and the Syrian civilians are still in danger.

The United States may not have any strong connection to Syria, making them responsible for the citizens. However, if the United States did choose to act and ended up causing more harm than good, it would be responsible for those adverse effects (Abratt, 2017, page 67). This is why the United States actors may be wary of intervening. However, there is also the Responsibility to Protect Doctrine that ties the United States to Syria in a humanitarian sense. Should the United States involve itself again? When searching for a solution, the Responsibility to Protect Doctrine from the United Nations should always be kept in mind. "The Responsibility to Protect" says that "states have an obligation to protect their citizens from mass atrocity crimes; that the international community will assist them in doing so; and that, should the state be 'manifestly

failing' in its obligations, the international community is obliged to act" (2017, section 1, para. 5).

Because of the Assad Regime's use of chemical weaponry, the United Nations, which includes the United States, is justified in intervening. Mediation is incredibly important, but military force should be used when citizens are actively being killed. Even if the state committing the atrocities is not compliant, the international community is obligated to intervene. The Responsibility to Protect Doctrine includes criteria that justify military intervention; there must be a real threat to many people's lives. The military intervention needs to have the intention of stopping the suffering, and it must be a last resort. It must have a "reasonable prospect of success," meaning there is a high probability that it will be successful. Finally, the military intervention must be proportional to the problem at hand. If the issue is smaller, there should not be a huge military attack ("Responsibility to Protect," 2017, section 5).

Considering the United States has an enormously well-funded military, it is important to recognize that they have the upper hand. It is also important to note that the United States holds much power within the United Nations itself, which means there will be less accountability from the international community to ensure the United States does not overstep its boundaries. When the United States uses necessary military intervention to protect vulnerable citizens who are dying, it must use that military intervention strategically, sparingly, and responsibly. The means should be tailored to the end ("Responsibility to Protect," 2017, section 5).

Assuming that the United States is justified in intervening, all military action must be directed toward ending the people's suffering. A direct attack on the chemical weapons being used could be a way towards that end. Instead of trying to stop the fighting altogether, the United States could disable Syria from being able to use those weapons in the first place (Abratt, 2017,

page 67). There is the possibility of this having dangerous consequences, but it is a matter of weighing the good against the bad. If the means are proportional to the end, then, in theory, it will have been worth it.

One concern when it comes to coming up with a solution is whether or not the United States will be willing to involve itself for purely selfless, humanitarian reasons. From a realist perspective, it is nearly impossible for the United States to want to involve itself for the good of others without receiving benefits as well, whether it be for nationalistic purposes or economic purposes. Even if the United States has selfish reasons, which a realist would naturally assume they do, a positive result would be sufficient to justify any negative motivations. If fewer people die because the United States intervened, their intentions could be a lesser concern. In an ideal world, every state and international actor would be desperate to help for the sake of the people. However, in a realistic world, it is necessary to accept that countries are willing to intervene in foreign crises because it also benefits them. As long as the reasons for intervening are not actively harmful, or at least less harmful than not intervening, then any action will have been worth it. If the Assad regime continues to commit war crimes against its people with internationally illegal weapons, punitive strikes would be an appropriate response. Bashar al-Assad has to know that this sort of treatment is unacceptable and that the international community has a responsibility to intervene. Because Russia plays such an important role in the United Nations and President Vladimir Putin is allied with Bashar al-Assad, the intervention of the United Nations is unlikely. Considering the unlikelihood of the United Nations intervening, the United States should resume punitive strikes to try to prevent Assad from harming Syrian citizens.

However, military intervention should always be considered as a last resort. Another plan would be to continue publicly embarrassing the Syrian government and treating them similar to a pariah state. Any state willing to use illegal chemical weapons against its citizens should not be treated as a legitimate state. It is important to have a “mutual and public commitment not to receive regime officials in any capacity, send out diplomatic feelers to Damascus, or participate in Assad-led reconstruction efforts” (Juul, 2019, para. 10). Should the United States be willing to help Syria rebuild? The answer depends on the context. The focus should always be to delegitimize Bashar al-Assad and his regime, so if Assad leads the relief efforts, the United States should not involve itself or assist the Assad Regime. “Assad and his allies in Moscow and Tehran should be forced to bear the financial burdens of rebuilding the society they did so much to help destroy” (Juul, 2019, para.12). This will help ensure that none of the United States’ funding is going towards a corrupt government that intends to harm its citizens.

What would rebuilding look like? One important place to start is at least rebuilding the health care system in Syria. Among the wreckage in Syria, the hospitals and health care workers have suffered exponentially. If the United States were to provide funding, ideally separate from Assad’s influence, medical care would be a good place to start, along with attempting to rebuild some of the shattered infrastructures.

However, is the United States capable of assisting Syrian citizens for purely humanitarian reasons? If the United States decides to involve itself, a harsh look at its intentions would be necessary. Whenever offering any assistance, it is crucial to ensure that the benefits of intervening outweigh the consequences. If the United States has intentions that are at least of neutral consequence, then perhaps intervention will be the right move.

Refugees are also a huge issue in Syria. According to the UNHCR, there are 6.6 million Syrian refugees (“UNHCR,” 2020). Returning them to a country torn apart would never be ethical, but it is important to rebuild with refugees in mind. If refugees are going to feel safe enough to return home, Assad must be out of power, and there must be a promise of some level of improved safety or a better life. This could include rebuilding homes, health care, school systems, and the job market.

Assisting refugees outside of Syria will also be a huge way for foreign actors to help. “This situation is not unique to Syria: often it is easier for international actors to reach those who have fled their country than those who remain” (Howe & Stites, 2019, para. 2). There are always barriers that stop international actors from reaching the people they intend to help. However, if those in need are refugees and not just internally displaced people, it will be easier to provide aid to them. This could include medical care, food, clothing, and more. It is important not to legitimize what Bashar al-Assad is doing in any way, so perhaps sending assistance to those outside the country would be the proper response. While those within Syria desperately need the help, it may not be entirely practical or possible to reach them.

Conclusion

The situation in Syria under the Assad Regime is dire and described as “the biggest humanitarian horror story of the twenty-first century” (Munch, 2020, para. 1). As more people die at the hands of Bashar-al-Assad, whom Russia’s President Vladimir Putin has backed, the need for international action becomes even more overwhelming and urgent.

The realist perspective makes this situation even more terrifying, as people start to fully grasp that there may be no such thing as assistance for humanitarian purposes. In Russia’s case, their involvement is selfish and damaging to the citizens and, in the end, will even be damaging

to Assad. What will he have to do in order to pay back Russia? What will that mean for the regime he has made thousands of people die for and lose their homes? The United States may have less immoral reasons to involve itself, but it is still an ambiguous topic. The United States has used the war on terror to insert itself into many situations, which is how former President Barack Obama was able to strike against Syria in the first place. When former President Donald Trump tried to fight back against the Assad Regime, he started to pull the troops out of Syria because he did not want the United States involved in any more Middle Eastern wars. How President Biden will choose to deal with the crisis in Syria remains uncertain.

The United States and Russia have both heavily involved themselves in the Syrian conflict, for better or for worse. While there are many selfish reasons Russia has involved itself, such as showing off its military power and looking for future arms customers, there were also some morally ambiguous intentions of the United States. It is important to recognize both the United States' and Russia's intentions in their involvement and how the international community can move forward from here.

It is in the best interest of Syria to employ the Responsibility to Protect Doctrine in situations that Assad has taken too far. That is why a portion of this essay was dedicated to explaining the punitive strikes by the United States against the Assad Regime. When a country puts its citizens in imminent danger, it is crucial that the international community step in. That being said, it should be obvious that those who are involving themselves in the conflict have taken other action before taking military action.

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