
America'S Involvement In The Syrian Civil War And Liberalism

Liberalism best explains America's involvement in the Syrian Civil War because of the emphasis on the individual's goodness, trusting institutions, and the support of allies. This theory's core belief is humans are usually good and society can change for the better (Mingst 83). A key philosopher in the development of the theory of liberalism is Immanuel Kant (Mingst 84). He departed from a common thought at the time that actors in liberalism must be moral (Mingst 84). Instead, he argued that rational actors who made decisions purely out of self-interest while interacting with other rational self-interested actors would reach the conclusion that having peace is the best option (Mingst 84). During the 20th Century Woodrow Wilson, a proponent of liberalism, theorized that on the individual level interactions are mostly based in a good nature and people have the ability to cooperate (Mingst 88). While liberalism views the world as basically good, states can engage in authoritarianism and other negative actions (Mingst 88).

Liberalism espouses the cause of bad governments to be inadequate institutions and ineffective communication among individual leaders (Mingst 83). One way Liberalism proposes reducing the power and threat of an undesirable state is through collective security. In other words, several states agree to take collective action if an enemy attacks any of the states who are a part of the agreement (Mingst 84). In addition, there is also a strong belief in progress and order through institutions such as the United Nations (UN), which often have a form of inherent collective security. In this context, America's involvement in the Syrian Civil war is a clear example of Liberalism. The first public action America made against the Assad government utilized liberalism on both the individual and state levels. In 2011, the Assad government was violently suppressing democratic protests inspired by Arab Spring that wanted to remove Assad from power (Conway). After the protests increased in intensity President Obama reached out to the Assad government and asked Assad to resign. This demonstrated an assumption that Assad is "basically good and capable of cooperating," because through this action, President Obama was essentially asking for cooperation from Assad (Mingst 88).

This action was taken with the hope that there was a chance Assad would resign implying that President Obama thought Assad was capable of seeing the moral option. This was further demonstrated in 2012 when President Obama made it clear that if the Assad government was using chemical weapons against its citizens it would trigger military action from America (Al Jazeera). If President Obama did not think Assad was "rational" and "capable of cooperation," or that there was an issue of communication that could be solved he would not have repeatedly communicated with the Assad government (Mingst 88). While it is possible that e President Obama was just trying to deescalate the situation, the fact remains that America did not have to get involved in the conflict so his actions indicate that on some level his choices are best explained by the theory of liberalism. President Obama's requests for Assad to step down were ineffective and his attempt to use direct military force was blocked by Congress (Conway). As a result, in 2013 in a demonstration of bilateral collective security, America began to arm anti-Assad armies such as the Free Syrian Army and Russia sided with the Assad government (Al Jazeera). As predicted by liberalism theory, neither side was escalating the conflict with direct action because "rational" leaders knew it would cause even more violent escalation than was

already present (Mingst 88).

Liberalism has a strong preference for institutions solving international conflict versus individual states initiating unnecessary conflict. If the conflict becomes inevitable the sides will attempt at least some degree of collective security or try using an institution to solve the solution first. This is what happened when America addressed the Assad government and allowed the UN to solve the problem through treaties, peace talks, and by following their direction (Al Jazeera). The UN took charge and urged countries, including America, “to meet their responsibility to the people of Syria and to the future of the region’ through a ‘political solution” (Diamond). In addition, in 2012, the UN facilitated a diplomatic talk between Assad government officials and officials that opposed the actions of the Assad government (Al Jazeera). America’s respect for the authority of an institution, the UN, reflected America’s consistent commitment to liberalism with respect to the handling of the Assad government. A misinterpretation of America’s involvement in Syria is that defensive realism provides an adequate explanation. While initially there are aspects of America’s involvement in Syria that could be explained by realism, when examined more closely it becomes evident that these actions are in fact incompatible with defensive realism. The lack of America’s direct intervention may seem like an aspect of realism in which American leaders protect their own interest to maintain power, however, there are numerous examples in this conflict of America embracing key aspects of liberalism in direct contradiction to realism. For example, there is no evidence that the Syrian people are “insecure” or “power-seeking” as realists would say (Mingst 82). In a 2012 statement from the White House it was made clear that “we must work with the Syrian people toward building a brighter future for Syria. ” (Office of the Press Secretary). President Obama did not display behavior that appeared “insecure,” “selfish,” or “power-seeking” as realists view the individual (Mingst 82). In direct contradiction with realist theory, President Obama decided to seek Congress’s permission for military action even though he did not have to and he respected their decision when they voted against him (Read And Listen). This is clearly explained by liberalism’s view of the individual.

Furthermore, America respected and supported the UN’s processes and their allies to a degree that could only be explained by liberalism. In President Obama’s speech to Congress he specifically addressed the vital role of institutions when he stated “What’s the purpose of the international system that we’ve built if a prohibition on the use of chemical weapons that has been agreed to by the governments of 98 percent of the world’s people and approved overwhelmingly by the Congress of the United States is not enforced?” (Read And Listen). While on the surface defensive realism provides a quick explanation to America’s involvement in Syria, only liberalism explains certain vital elements while also capturing the political context of the era and the individuals involved. Since Woodrow Wilson, liberalism generally has been an accurate theory to explain foreign policy decisions in America for both Democrat and Republican presidents. It will be interesting to observe whether liberalism will continue to describe America’s interactions in the Syrian Civil War as an inevitable shift in political philosophy occurs worldwide.