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## Liberalism And The American Intervention in The Syrian Civil War

The trend of dictatorships being toppled in the Arab region, otherwise known as the Arab Spring, prompted a civil war in Syria. In 2011, a group of young students who had been arrested and tortured intensified the anger of the Syrians that brought demonstrations to the streets. 1 The Syrian Army, under the orders of the President Bashar al-Assad, resorted to violence; killing and injuring hundreds of civilians (Aljazeera. com, 2018). These violent events caught international attention that resulted in the United State's intervention. Theories help us understand and explain these events by specifying the relationships among the actors (Mingst & Arreguín-Toft, 2016, p. 72). Considering the evidence, the theory of liberalism best explains the US intervention; however, the realist theory comes in second because of some irregularities with America's actions with the nature of said theory.

Liberalism is an international relations theory that holds the fundamental assumption that "human nature is basically good and that people can improve their moral and material conditions, thus making societal progress--including lasting peace--possible"(Mingst & Arreguín-Toft, 2016, p. 83). It stresses the idea that collective security is beneficial in attaining the common interest (Mingst & Arreguín-Toft, 2016, p. 83-84). One of the most proponent thinkers of the theory is Immanuel Kant. In Kant's view, every citizen has an "equal moral worth, and in which an abuse in rights in one part of the world is 'felt everywhere'" (Dunne & Hanson, 2017, p. 63-64). With these claims in mind, the US arguably intervened with the liberal theory in mind having responded through international cooperation and taking action due to the human rights violation by the dictatorial rule of President al-Assad. In 2013, then-President Barack Obama released a statement saying that a chemical weapon attack would cross the "Red line" that would prompt "enormous consequences" (Houeix, 2018). In August the same year, a series of what appeared to be chemical attacks in the Damascus' neighboring areas took the lives of thousands of civilians.

On a state-level analysis, the expected response from the US would have been an immediate intervention, but due to internal conflicts with Congress, Obama backed down. The administration then resulted to diplomacy and a US-Russian agreement to dismantle Syria's chemical weapons capability was signed in Geneva on September 14, 2013 (Houeix, 2018). Going back to the fundamental claims of Liberalism--more specifically, Wilsonian Idealism (a form of liberal internationalism), "war is preventable through the collective action of states" (Mingst & Arreguín-Toft, 2016, p. 83). This liberal action of "[placing] faith in international law and legal instruments" to eliminate human rights atrocities and stop the war is at the very heart of the belief in the nature of human--and therefore also states--as rational in nature (Mingst & Arreguín-Toft, 2016, p. 84). Although the US eventually proceeded on taking direct military actions in Syria, there is still a strong presence of pushing for justice and peace through international cooperation in the UN and other organizations. In August 2017, the US launched a "cruise missile attack on a Syrian airfield in response to Bashar al-Assad regime's use of chemical weapons" (Ackerman, Pilkington, Jacobs, Borger, 2017). Trump addressed the international community to "join us in seeking to end the slaughter in Syria" (Ackerman, Pilkington, Jacobs, Borger, 2017). The said attacks substantiate the liberal vision of "[emphasizing] the wellbeing of the individual as the fundamental building block of a just

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political system” (Meiser, 2018). It can also be argued that the US is advocating to democratize Syria due to the ineffective dictatorial government currently in place.

According to the democratic peace theory, democratic countries are less likely to go to war against each other due to the internal restraints and because they see each other as legitimate states (Meiser, 2018) (Mello, 2018). The liberal theory applies in the intervention due to the mistrust of the US towards Syria because of the political system in place, and because of the human rights atrocities. Realism is an international relations theory that is centered on the claim that “[individuals] are generally fearful and power seeking” (Mingst & Arreguín-Toft, 2016, p. 73). Moreover, according to Mingst, “states act as individuals might” which essentially means that international actors act in their self-interest to make sure that they are more powerful than the other. The ideas of Thucydides in History of the Peloponnesian War serve as a basis of realists (Mingst & Arreguín-Toft, 2016, p. 77). Thucydides stated that “[states] need to protect itself from enemies both foreign and domestic” (Mingst & Arreguín-Toft, 2016, p. 77). Analyzing the motives of the US, it could be argued that the goal of the intervention is to rid of international terrorist organization and to assert the declining American presence in the Arab region (Jenkins, 2013).

However, these reasons do not necessarily fortify the claim that the American intervention is realist in nature due to the minimal direct benefits to America. Then-president Barack Obama delivered a speech in Cairo “that promised a new future for the Middle East, and especially for the Arab nations that make up its core” (Kranz, 2018). In the height of the Arab Springs, the US had committed itself to use its power in the region to advance Arab democratic interests” (Kranz, 2018). Obama’s approach to the Syrian conflict was seen by Arabs as a betrayal due to the military inaction in the early stages of the civil war (Kranz, 2018) (chicagotribune.com, 2018). Due to the trend of Arab countries one-by-one falling to Russia’s embrace, the US took a more direct assault to the airfields in Syria--a clear manifestation of American military might. Moreover, many Syrians question the merits of America’s real intentions in meddling with the Middle East (Kranz,2018). Many claim the reason is to protect its allies but even more say it is because of the singular “focus on stamping out terrorism in the region” which have essentially “dampened hopes that the US has ever had the best interest of Arabs in mind” or perhaps--in realist terms-- just its own (Kranz, 2018).

America is clearly in the region for reasons more than the humanitarian crises. It has been in Syria to exert dominance both in the region, the terrorist organizations, and the Syrian government. Realism, however, insufficiently explain the American intervention in Syria due to the inadequacy of direct benefits to the US. As tackled before, realism is centered on self-preservation as states are rational actors who act for the benefit of the national interest (Mingst & Arreguín-Toft, 2016, p. 77). The said theory is not representative of the American intervention because it is notable that the US has been acting in response to the skyrocketing casualties in the region. Moreover, the real motivation of the involvement in the civil war can be traced back to Obama’s “red line” statement--a message prompted due to the human rights violation brought about by the chemical weapon attacks in Syria. The US intervention is a reflection of liberalism more than realism because of the utilization of different international organizations in working towards interstate cooperation. Moreover, the said military attacks are done to benefit the Syrian people more than the national interest of the United States, something that goes against the ideas of realism. The realist theory has insufficiently backed the American intervention in the Syrian Civil War due to the intentions of the country to democratize and eradicate the human rights violation against the civilians--something that does not coincide with

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the main idea of the said theory of “self-preservation” and “national interest first.” On the other hand, liberalism applies in the intervention due to the use of international forums and other organizations to advocate for the eradication of the use of mass destructive weapons. While both theories apply, liberalism best explains the American actions thus far: a mix of championing for human rights and being involved in collective security (Mingst & Arreguín-Toft, 2016, p. 84).

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