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An Analysis of Syrian Conflict with the Lens of the Realist School of Thought

Abstract *The Syrian war is rooted in the conflict between the Sunni opposition and Shia leader President Bashar, torn the country. The Syrian war took baby steps during the Arab Spring, which was supposed to bring hope and prosperity to Syria but unfortunately led to a series of horrifying protests that grew into a 9-year long civil war. The war-torn country has forced millions to escape the horrors of continuous fighting only to seek refuge in other countries with bare minimum resources. Multiple efforts by the International Organizations (I.Os) to halt the conflict between President Bashar and the opposition have repeatedly failed, and apparently, there is no hope for a peaceful solution. This paper aims to explain the Syrian war and break down the reason behind each ally's support to the chosen party and understand the Syrian conflict through the lens of Realism. The realist theory will shed some light on the root cause of international intervention by world powers and regional powers and how each actor's actions prolonged the conflict in Syria. And finally, to understand how domestic and international politics was used to carry out heinous crimes against innocent Syrian men, women, and children and analyze the strategies of actors to gain power in the region.*

Key Words: Syria, Civil War, Regional Alliances, International Alliances, Sectarianism, Balance of Power

Introduction

Many Syrians have been displaced searching for refuge, those left behind struggle to stay alive since the fighting began in 2011. With hundreds of thousands living below the poverty line and barely hanging on by a thread, the 'Syrian War' has resulted in one of the worst humanitarian crises of the 21st century affecting over 12 million Syrian lives. UNHCR High Commissioner Filippo Grandi explains the crisis as, "Syria is the biggest humanitarian and refugee crisis of our time, a continuing cause of suffering for millions which should be garnering a groundswell of support around the world." [\(United Nations 2016\)](#). According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), "From January to April 2018 more than 920,000 individuals had been newly displaced inside of Syria, according to the UN. Neighboring countries – including Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon – continued to prevent Syrians from seeking asylum at their borders, despite serious risks of violence. By September 2018, 5.6 million Syrians have taken refuge outside the country, the majority in neighboring countries." [\(Human rights watch 2018\)](#). The Syrian war is a direct outcome of the public protests to overthrow the government of Bashar Al-Assad in March 2011, when peaceful antigovernment protestors were arrested in the city of Daraa. As protests continued to escalate in the country, Syrians began to flee their homes. According to reports millions have settled in neighboring countries — Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt and Turkey — since March 2013. Turkey was the first country to step up and build a refugee camp, which in 2018 was reported to host a population more than 3.6 million refugees. Over 655,000 Syrians have fled to Jordan and are living in exile and an estimate of 139,000 Syrians have been living with bare minimum resources in Za'atari and Azraq refugee camps. A growing number of Syrian refugees have also been arriving in Iraq, which is currently hosting approximately 246,000 people, while UNHCR is making efforts to assist more than

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126,000 refugees in Egypt, as of 2018. Humanitarian Crisis Analysis conducted by Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) in 2019 breaks down the escalating numbers of the refugees as “The conflict in Syria, now in its ninth year, is one of the largest displacement crises in history where around half of the population has been displaced, either internally (6.2 million) or as refugees to, mainly, neighbouring countries and, to a smaller extent to other countries (5.6 million registered refugees). Refugee outflow was highest in 2011-2015, before refugee hosting countries closed their borders. The largest refugee population is hosted by Turkey (registered 3.6 million), followed by Lebanon (registered 1 million, estimated 1.5 million) and Jordan (registered 700 000, estimated 1.3 million).” The overflowing of refugees did not stop in the Middle East as Syrians started to seek refuge in Europe. European Union (E.U.) reported to take in more than 96,000 Syrians in 2019, many of whom were granted ‘protected status’ by Germany. According to the UNHCR, more than 584,000 Syrians are living in Germany. Greece, Sweden, and Austria also became other popular destinations for Syrian refugees, though the numbers declined in 2017 due to a sudden increase in anti-immigration groups, such as the Generation Identity Movement. Eighty-five thousand refugees are reported to have settled in the U.S., and Canada has taken in an estimated 68,000 since 2015 [\(Todd 2019\)](#).

The fighting in Syria may be ending soon, but for Syrians displaced in the country and those residing across the world, it seems far away from the finish as an entire generation is hanging in the balance against unprecedented challenges; surviving not only the horrors of war but poverty, hunger, and sickness as well. The Syrian war through the lens of Realism helps to understand the root cause of why the war began and the motives behind each nations’ intervention. However, since realists do not recognize non-state actors, the significance of Al-Qaeda, ISIS, and Hezbollah — important non-state actors — is not considered. The role they played throughout the war brought victories to each side as the conflict matured. Such as, ISIS was able to occupy critical Syrian cities and declared the city of Raqqa as the Syrian capital. The extremist groups have also been blamed for radicalizing thousands of Syrians, weakening the position, and damaging the reputation of Syrian rebel groups. The movement of extremist groups was recognized as a threat by the U.S. and other western countries and forced the U.S. to intervene in the Syrian war on the ground. The shortcomings of Realism theory are that, since non-state actors do not hold importance in the realist paradigm, they do not pose a real threat to world powers. Realism also fails to explain the international efforts such as peace talks and ceasefires to end the conflict in Syria.

Syrian War — Back to Starting Line

The Syrian War is a series of related events, often described as a 'complex web' consisting of multiple international actors, opposing groups from within the country, and shocking events that have turned Syria into a land of terror, turmoil, and lost hope. The Syrian war captioned as ‘A Loss of Faith’ by Tim Williams — research at University College London — started in March of 2011 during the Arab Spring, which became the foundation for the pro-democracy movement in the country. There may be many reasons that can explain why fighting blew out of proportion. Still, one significant event was linked to President Bashar Al-Assad’s orders to attack non-violent protesters in Daraa, which also led to mass arrests, torture, and killings of innocent civilians, especially young adults and teenagers. The arrests had a ripple effect and sparked rage among the already angry citizens demanding President Bashar to resign from his post; soon after, a civil war broke out between the protestors and President Bashar’s supporters. By July that year, Syrian rebels formed the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which was recognized as the first rebel group that operated against President Bashar’s regime.

A mix of multiple international actors has added further stress to the conflict. The ongoing fighting is against the poor economic conditions, high unemployment rate, corruption, and a right to freedom, but fueled by their supporters, a fight between two religious groups — Shia and Sunnis. They once lived in harmony and accepted each other’s religious differences; unfortunately, today, they have been the root cause of many enduring conflicts for years, not only in Syria but also in other parts of the

Middle East. The Syrian war became much more complicated when the supporters of Shia and Sunni entered the war in the form of countries and other organizations that supported the fighting by providing weapons, men, and finances. On the one hand, there is President Bashar and his supporters Iran, Russia, and Hezbollah — a Lebanese militia — while on the other hand, the rebel groups are maintained by United States, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, and Europe. In the background, other religious groups ISIS and Al-Qaeda, have also been accounted to actively participating in the war. Julie M. Norman, a research fellow in Conflict Transformation and Social Justice at the Queen's University Belfast, writes, "The Syrian conflict has been described as a civil war, a proxy war and a sectarian war." On one level, the Syrian government, backed by Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah, is pitted against the "moderate" rebels, supported by the US-led coalition, Turkey and the Gulf States, with everyone scrambling to contain Islamic State. Kurds fighting I.S. and Assad regime are supported by the West but are also being bombed by Turkey, trying to stem a Kurdish uprising within its borders. Things could get even more complex following the latest atrocities and France's growing engagement [\(Ketchell 2015\)](#). With so many 'actors' fighting the war in Syria, the true agenda of 'giving Syrians the right to freedom' has faded away; instead, growing numbers of Syrian refugees are proof that the 'end to the war' is far away from the finish line. Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) estimated around 500,000 Syrians casualties in the fighting and over a million injured. "At least 560,000 have been killed, but that it was able to document the deaths of only 367,965 fully. Of the 560,000, it said, 111,330 are civilians, including 20,819 under 18 and 13,084 women. Some 65,048 Syrian soldiers have been killed, and 50,296 members of militias backing them. A t108 members of radical groups – including those linked to Al,-Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISIS) – have also been killed. As concerns opposition fighters, 63,561, including those operating under the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), have been killed. At least 1,675 fighters from the Lebanese Hezbollah – the Shia movement allied with Damascus and Iran – have also lost their lives in the fighting. Of the over 500,000 killed, some 104,000 were tortured to death in Syrian government jails." [\(SOHR 2018\)](#). United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in 2019 has also estimated that 11.7 million Syrians displaced in the country acutely require humanitarian aid for survival. The 'Syrian War' results are devastating for those who have fled or migrated and who remain in the country, not knowing when they will be able to return to their true home.

International Actors

Syria has one of the most argumentative foreign policies in the international arena, fueling the gruelling civil war in Syria. The country's war is being fought between religious groups, rebel groups, and the Syrian government for years, but the third-party interventions by the international actors have altered the dynamics; if it were not for Russia and Iran's support, President Bashar's regime and the weakening of the central government would have been left defenceless. The sad truth is that the only ones being affected by the war are the civilians caught in between, and the rising refugee crisis has added pressure to the economies, which has also caused social and political strain for all countries hosting Syrian refugees.

United States

Since 2014, an international coalition of around 60 nations has aimed to fight extremist religious groups. However, In Syria, the U.S. avoided direct participation in the Syrian war and, since 2012, has also partaken and supported U.N. peace talks held in Geneva between President Bashar's supporters and the rebel groups, which failed to reach a breakthrough. But that changed, "In September 2014, then-President Barack Obama launched an air campaign against the Islamic State in Syria, one month after starting airstrikes in neighboring Iraq. The Islamic State had built substantial military firepower in Syria, which was used to sweep western and northern Iraq earlier in 2014. In late 2015 the first American ground troops entered Syria — initially 50, growing to the current official total of about 2,000. They recruited, organized, and advised thousands of Syrian Kurdish and Arab fighters, dubbed

the Syrian Democratic Forces, and pushed I.S. out of most of its strongholds. The US-led coalition has launched airstrikes on at least 17,000 locations in Syria since the start of the operation. ... there were strikes on 208 locations, largely on Islamic State fighters and facilities in the Middle Euphrates River Valley, according to the U.S. military. Thousands of I.S. fighters have been killed or captured, but U.S. military officials say there are as many as 2,000 insurgents still in the Minimum Efficiency Reporting Value (MERV) and several others who have escaped to various locations around the country.” [\(The Associated Press 2018\)](#). In 2017, President Trump ordered an airstrike targeting an airbase claiming that it was in response to President Bashar's attack on the Syrian citizens with chemical weapons. The U.S. has yet to give a concrete reason for its presence and interference in the Syrian war. There are conflicting answers as to whether the U.S. supports a peace deal with President Bashar or not, but one thing is for sure that the U.S. wants to stop Iran and Hezbollah from establishing a stronghold in Syria. The war has also compelled the U.S. and its NATO allies to come dangerously close to fighting with Russia on more than one occasion as Russia has been strongly supporting President Bashar with military supplies that are being used against the civilians. The US-led effort to force President Bashar's government out of power in support of the rebel groups in Syria is not because it wants the same things as the Syrian people but because of the ongoing U.S. proxy war against Iran and Russia.

The U.S. has been using Syrian refugees' traumas as an excuse to interfere in the war and why the war needs to end, but unfortunately, the same reason does not apply to let the refugees seek asylum in the country. The Obama administration had prioritized Syrian refugees in its' second term because it became evident that the situation for the civilians was only getting worse by the second with no access to humanitarian assistance, poor living conditions, shortage of food and clean drinking water, and rising health issues. Things quickly took the turn for the worst when Trump took over office in 2017. Washington Post states that "The number of Syrian refugees allowed into the United States in fiscal 2016 was 12,587. In fiscal 2018, the United States admitted 62. The drop is largely the result of the Trump administration slashing the total number of refugees allowed into the country each year to 30,000, a historic low, and because of enhanced security screenings instituted for refugees from 11 countries, including Syria, that the United States consider threats to national security. The decline has been most precipitous among refugees from Muslim-majority countries, where admissions fell by 90 percent from 2017 to 2018, according to the International Refugee Assistance Project" [\(Zezima 2019\)](#).

Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States

Saudi Arabia and its allies in the Gulf showered unconditional support to the Syrian rebels did not come as a surprise because the Syrian war paved the way for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, providing them with a perfect opportunity to weaken the alliance between President Bashar and the Islamic Republic of Iran. As Riyadh's biggest rival, Tehran wants more power in the Gulf and the Middle East, Saudi Arabia's involvement in the Syrian war ensured that Iran failed in its objectives [\(Chivera and Schmitt 2013\)](#). Since December 2012, Saudi Arabia and Qatar emerged as prominent external actors in the conflict by supplying infantry weapons and military ammunition, such as M-60 recoilless rifles and M79 Osa from Yugoslavia and anti-tank weapons from Croatia to the rebel groups that were fighting against President Bashar. The weapons and ammunition were being shipped from the Turkish border in the north, but the supply route changed to the Jordanian border in the south in 2012, intending to support the rebel groups to move towards Damascus [\(Sly and Deyoung 2013\)](#). The arms funding to the rebel groups was said to counter the supply of military weapons to President Bashar's supporters from Iran. From 2012 to 2013, Saudi Arabia also took part in a secret operation known as Timber Sycamore led by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to train Syrian rebels. It mainly included the supply of vast sums of money, weapons, and military training to various rebel groups fighting against President Bashar [\(Mazzetti and Puzzo 2016\)](#). According to Wall Street Journal, Saudi Prince Bandar bin Sultans' was appointed to lead the Saudi government to overthrow President Bashar's regime in August 2013. The objective crystal clear is 'to topple President Bashar's government' by any means possible. The Saudi government started sending prisoners who were on death row to fight in Syria as a punishment

(Winter 2013) and made successful efforts to convince the U.S. and the world that President Bashar and his supporters were using chemical weapons against the civilians [\(Entous, Malas and coker 2013\)](#). In early 2018, all hope seemed lost as the Syrian rebel groups failed to keep their ground against President Bashar's forces. The U.S. started talks with affiliated fighting groups and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to end U.S. military presence in Syria and replacing the U.S. soldiers with a multilateral force that consisted of soldiers from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt; however, Egypt refused to send troops to Syria [\(Ammoud 2018\)](#).

Reports suggested that although Gulf states and Saudi Arabia have shown great support to the Syrian rebels, they have been heavily criticized by the international media and the rest of the world for failing to open the borders for the Syrian refugees, mainly because Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states do not have any policy on refugees. They have not signed the U.N. Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, and as non-signatories, they are not obligated to accept refugees. Saudi Arabia, however, claimed that "... reports about its response to the Syrian refugee crisis are false and misleading and it has given residency to 100,000 people as war rages in their country". A Saudi press agency's Saudi official, said "the country did not want to show off or brag in the media about its response to Syria. 'However, it sees the importance of clarifying these efforts in response to false and misleading media reports about the kingdom. The kingdom had supported Syrian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and other countries in coordination with the host countries while providing a total of about \$700m in humanitarian aid" [\(The Guardian 2015\)](#). The Saudi government is also collaborating with the U.N. World Food Program (WFP), providing refugees with a food supply. Saudi International Organization for Relief, Welfare, and Development (IORWD) has also been set up to work on projects such as food-for-work in refugee camps in Sudan and many other countries to allow refugees to support themselves and improve their financial condition by making them productive and not needy. The organization has also reported sponsoring orphans from worn-torn countries such as Syria and Palestine by providing them with education, supplies, and health care [\(Arab News 2019\)](#).

Turkey

Turkey's involvement in the Syrian war began in 2011. Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan, from the very beginning, opposed President Bashar and condemned his orders of arresting and killings civilians. Turkey also supported Syrian rebels fighting against President Bashar by supplying them with weapons and money and fighting alongside the non-Kurdish groups such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA). In 2016, the Turkish Armed Forces led a military operation termed 'Euphrates Shield' in Syria. They targeted the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), "The operation, called Euphrates Shield, has a dual purpose: to dislodge Isis from Jarablus, its last major redoubt on the 500-mile border, and to contain the expansion of Kurdish militias in northern Syria. Turkish tanks crossed the Syrian border as artillery and fighter jets pounded the militants in operation backed by the US-led coalition. The incursion also opened corridors for Syrian opposition fighters backed by Turkey, who mounted an assault in the area." [\(Shaheen 2016\)](#)

Along with the U.S., Turkey was also involved in conducting airstrikes against the Islamic State (I.S.) and Kurdish opposition forces. Turkey's participation in the Syrian war is primarily derived from one objective; preventing Syrian Kurdish forces, which are affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and are perceived as a terrorist group by Turkey, E.U., and the U.S., to occupy territory and stopping them from settling in Syria. Turkey has also participated in the Geneva talks and has shown great concern about whether President Bashar should continue his presidency.

However, it's not as black and white as it sounds; although Turkey has been trying to play messiah in Syria for a long time, its role in Syria is more complicated than it portrays. A report published by Columbia University explains, "the National Intelligence Organization of Turkey built a highway from Sanliurfa in Turkey to Raqqa — the ISIS capital in Syria. It assisted 40,000 foreign jihadists from more than 100 countries who transited through Turkey to the front line in Syria. Turkey invaded Afrin in January 2018. The offensive, called Operation Olive Branch, killed hundreds of Kurds and displaced

nearly a quarter million. Russia controlled the air space west of the Euphrates and was complicit. Turkey invaded Kurdish lands east of the Euphrates in October 2019. Hundreds were killed and many displaced, including Kurds, Armenians, and Syriac Christians. Turkey's jihadist proxies committed atrocities, mutilating the bodies of female fighters. Despite assurances, Syrian ground forces backed by Russian air power intensified attacks, pushing 900,000 people from their homes. Turkey sealed its border, leaving displaced Syrians with no place to go. Turkey was weaponizing refugees by dumping displaced people on the border with Greece" [_\(Phillips 2020\)](#). As of May 2018, approximately 3.6 million Syrian refugees have been allowed to seek asylum in Turkey and are placed in displacement camps controlled by Turkish security forces. Istanbul has 548,000 registered Syrian refugees, Gaziantep 443,000, Sanliurfa 431,000, and Hatay province 430,000 [_\(Karasapan 2019\)](#).

Iran

Iran consistently supported President Bashar throughout the Syria war. The Iran-Bashar alliance is not based on their mutual religious or ethnic interests but is powered by two factors; their hunger for more authority and control over the Gulf and the Middle East and their disliking towards Saddam Hussein because Syria was the only consistent ally of Iran in the 1979 Islamic revolution. These two factors have garnered their friendship throughout the years and became the base of Iran's unconditional support to President Bashar [_\(Goodarzi 2009\)](#). Iran has maintained a significant presence in Syria due to its strategic interests in support of President Bashar. Iran also supported the uprising in the Middle East and termed it 'Islamic awakenings.' However, when the civil war broke out in Syria against President Assad's regime, Iran stepped forward and condemned the Syrian rebel forces calling them 'terrorists' mainly because the United States supported them. Without Iran's political, financial, and military backing, President Bashar would not have been able to stand his guard against the Syrian rebel groups and their allies. [_\(Fulton, Holliday and Wyer 2013\)](#). Iran also wanted that President Bashar stays in power because of the established understanding between them. Hence they were deeply concerned about his predecessor and if they would support Iran or not. Given Syria's Sunni majority, Iran feared that if a Sunni regime came into power after President Bashar, it would help Saudi Arabia and the United States. Former Iranian Supreme National Security Advisor Saeed Jalili showed great concern on his visit to Damascus in August 2012, "Iran will not allow the axis of resistance, of which it considers Syria to be the main pillar, to be broken in any way." [_\(Fulton, Holliday and Wyer 2013\)](#).

Since the protests began, Iran's financial position was under threat became critical as the protest developed into a civil war. For a safe future trade, Iran aided President Bashar initially to stop the unrest from growing further. "Iran's annual trade with Syria is around \$700 million per year, less than half of its trade with Afghanistan and a small fraction of its \$30 billion trade with China" (CBS News. 2012). According to reports published by the U.S. and Iran, Tehran formed a Syrian paramilitary force, which consisted of 50,000 fighters called Jaysh-al-Shabi (The People's Army), to help the Syrian government stop the rebel groups from escalating the already intense situation. [_\(Sadjapour 2013\)](#). Iran also sent forces from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to Syria to suppress the unrest and the protests. After the civil war began and hope of a non-violent approach seemed useless, Iran reportedly aided President Bashar in developing chemical weapons system by providing scientists, equipment, chemicals, and technical training. [_\(Ball 2012\)](#).

Russia

Russia officially entered the Syrian Conflict in September 2015 by launching multiple airstrikes against FSA and other rebel groups. Russia intervened to help President Bashar in recovering territory from FSA and its allies. The decision to intervene in Syria, a long-time partner of Russia, was based mainly on political and military factors but primarily on the basis that military intervention from Russia could help President Bashar's regime from collapsing. Syria proved to be a reliable partner for Russia by allowing Russians to operate from a small naval base, and since the intervention, it was upgraded to an airbase with other facilities. The Syrian conflict also paved the way for Russia to promote its agenda

and restore its' place as a major world player. "RAND director of the Center for Global Risk and Security, Andrew Parailiti, explains why Russia decided to intervene in the war, which includes its willingness to aid an ally, and challenge the U.S. role in the world. The Russians are concerned that if Assad fell, you would either have a group in power that included jihadists who would be inimical to U.S. and Russian, and other interests. Or you would have a continually destabilized state that allowed these terrorist groups to continue. ... challenging the U.S. role. In a lesson learned from the previous era, Russia went along with the U.N. resolution, which allowed what was then called the Right to Protect Use of Force in Libya during the Obama administration. And that ended up leading to the downfall of Gaddafi, and we saw what happened there. Russia is not ever going to let that happen again. They're going to try to prevent, actually, any U.S. or other military intervention that could destabilize a friendly state." [_\(Salter 2018\)](#).

Driven by its' geopolitical agenda ventured into a joint campaign with the Syrian Air Force launching attack after attack destroying hospitals, school, towns, cities, bakeries, infrastructure, and other public facilities; adding to the humanitarian catastrophe, leaving thousands of children without parents to look after themselves and permanently disabling a lot more. "They saw defeating the Islamic State and playing first fiddle in directing a political settlement in Syria as an opportunity to assert Russia's status as a global power. The chance to fight together with Western nations, combined with Moscow's special relations with the Syrian regime and Iran, which carried out most of the fighting on the ground, meant that the Kremlin could present itself as fighting against a universal evil in the form of the Islamic State while also securing a comparative edge. Emerging as a regional power was another objective. Speaking in the plenary meeting of the United Nations General Assembly that took place just two days before the aerial campaign, Putin endowed Russia with a 'fixer role' by famously addressing the United States with the question: 'Do you at least realize now what you've done?' Moscow sensed the opportunity to fill a vacuum in a metastasizing conflict zone that only grew as American disillusionment with an interventionist U.S. Middle East policy deepened. The fixer role has delivered its benefits, but Russia didn't enter Syria to fix it. Putin always intended to be much more than a fixer; he wanted Moscow to be an indispensable actor." [_\(Frolovskiy 2019\)](#).

Through the Lens of Realism

Syria's land of lost hope' became a battleground for multiple international actors 9 years ago. Every actor motivated and driven by its own geopolitical and military agenda lost sight of what caused the civil war in the first place. The U.S., Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Russia, or Iran failed to settle the civil war between President Bashar and the opposition. Instead of bringing peace and harmony, the domestic and international actors wrapped Syria in a web of military attacks, bombarding neighborhood after neighborhood, not only killing innocent men, women, and children who had no direct link to any militant group but forcing millions out of the country generating one of the worst refugee crisis in the world. The reactions towards the Syrian refugees of Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the US, Canada, Europe, and others are highly debatable. All these countries were directly and/or indirectly involved in the Syrian war, but when it came to taking in refugees, many failed to play their part efficiently. One might argue that the reason why the Syrian conflict was prolonged is due to international intervention. If President Bashar did not support Iran and Russia, the opposition would have toppled his government within weeks. It is unfair for the millions of Syrian refugees that they not only had to leave their homes but endure emotional and physical trauma just so countries like Iran and Russia could gain regional power. What is even worse is that the Syrian refugees who managed to survive the horrors of war live below the poverty line in many countries, for they are not financially equipped to handle a situation like this and provide them with good living conditions. When Syrian refugees fled their homes, they were not just fleeing bombs, airstrikes, shelling, gunfire, and murder; they were running away from human rights issues, war crimes, chemical weapons, and rape.

Every nation has its' own drafted policy that allows them to take in refugees and give them protected status. [_\(Betts and Loescher 2011\)](#). The international system helps establish lenses, which

helps us better understand how the theory of Realism can be applied to the Syrian war. According to Realism, a nation's sovereignty and protection of national security are the number one priority, and every country looks after itself, thus driven by its self-interest to remain influential in the international system. If it were not in the interest of the western world to aid Syrian opposition — financially and militarily — then they would not have intervened. A realist would not spend time, energy, and resources without gaining anything from it. Neither the U.S., E.U., Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Russia, or Iran would allow risking its security if they were not affected by who won the Syrian war. However, this is not always the case. Many nations have given many refugees protected status and are rehabilitating them. The Syrian refugee crisis struck like a tsunami, and many countries could not cope with the wave of refugees spilling into their borders. They were not ready or politically equipped to shape policies overnight to aid the Syrian refugees, especially Jordan and Lebanon. They did not close their borders and managed in the best way possible.

On the other hand, stronger nations such as the U.S. and E.U. should not have come forward to help developing nations aid the refugee crisis. If they did so at the time, maybe the Syrian refugees would not have crossed the Mediterranean Sea. Furthermore, the role of I.O.s is significant, such as the Human Rights Watch (HRW) that assessed, documented, and reported hundreds of cases that violated the laws of war, but Realism fails to identify the roles of I.O.s.

If you think about it at first, the Syrian war might be easy to explain, but Realism explains more than just what drove the Syrians to start a civil war. Dunne T., and Smith B, explain that realists are united by one principle, "is the assertion that, in international politics, the pre-eminent goal is survival." The survival of a nation is most important. By 2013, it became evident that President Bashar's regional competitors, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, were providing rebel groups with military ammunition and financial support, which led President Bashar to order a full-scale operation against the rebel groups. Syria's multi-ethnic and religious rivalry began to take shape in the open — Sunni vs Shia became the new norm in the country. From the realist lens, survival of the regime and the win against Sunni at the cost of civil war and the biggest humanitarian crisis seemed justifiable. Realists regard the state as the only actor in the international arena [\(Dunne and Smith 2011\)](#). Therefore, rebel groups and the opposition were not recognized as legal representatives of the Syrian people, even if they fought for justification.

Realists instead focused on states involved in the Syrian war and studied their intervention to comprehend the conflict and investigate how to end it? Extremist religious groups like ISIS, ISIL, and Daesh fought their own battles in Syria while refusing to identify international borders. In a documentary published in 2014 by Vice News, ISIS demolished the borders between Iraq and Syria in the name of a united Arab country. [\(Dairieh 2015\)](#). Realism fails to acknowledge non-state actors and considers extremist groups a threat to a nation's sovereignty, but after 2014, ISIS was able to gain recognition, even if it was for a short time; this was because when ISIS intervened in the Syrian war, it did not oppose as a security threat to Syria itself. Instead, it fought against Iranian forces who were actively participating in military attacks on the Syrian population.

The constant threat of anarchy in the international arena has forced states to depend on themselves for survival. Professor William Wohlforth explains, "anarchy at the international level is one of the central propositions that define the tradition of realism. Based on his definition, realists believe "the absence of government dramatically shapes the nature of international politics" (Wohlforth C. W., 2010). Realists believe that a global government does not exist, and no country will support another country's interests if there is no gain. Thus it is every country for itself, and every leader should only pursue the interest of their own country. This is explained in 'The Globalization of World Politics' as "each sovereign state considers itself to be its own highest authority and does not recognize a higher power" [\(Dunne and Smith 2011\)](#). President Bashar's opposition was strong enough to end his regime if there was no intervention from Russia or Iran; only when they intervened was President Bashar able to stand against the opposition. Iran supporter of President Bashar has been known to defy world orders. Iranian Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has reported criticizing 'the world order,' instead, he refers to it as 'global arrogance' [\(Reuters 2015\)](#). Even though President Bashar failed to provide for his

people and was the root cause of many living in poor conditions with little food, water, and medical supplies, Iran still decided to support President Bashar, fully aware of how Syrians were being detained and brutally murdered all over the country. No world power country could intervene between Iran's support for President Bashar; they could only 'criticize' the crimes being committed against Syrians from the sidelines. The same is the case with the Russian intervention. Although Russia refrained from a military intervention at first, they actively participated in United Nations Security Council (UNSC) supporting President Bashar and his attacks against the opposition. Russia vetoed as many as 11 resolutions in the UNSC against President Bashar and favored the opposition. [\(Nichols 2017\)](#). Russia's support for President Bashar was based on their long-term friendship and the fear of western rule in Syria. Russia saw western powers as a threat to the Syria-Russia friendship and the balance of power in the region. Mearsheimer explains, in his book 'The Tragedy of Great Power Politics, "great powers are always searching for opportunities to gain power over their rivals, with hegemony as their final goal." [\(Mearsheimer 2001\)](#). Russia's fear grew against American intervention in Syria, given that the U.S. had already taken down two regimes — Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq and the Taliban in Afghanistan. However, some realists believe "armed resistance by U.S. foes in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, and foot-dragging by its formal allies constitute the beginnings of balancing against U.S. hegemony." Syrian opposition groups with the backing of the US-led Russia and Iran believe that their balance of power in the region was compromised, and if President Bashar was to lose his control over Syria, then both Iran and Russia would lose their power. That being said, neither the I.O.s nor the U.S. could stop Russia and Iran from supporting the brutalities of President Bashar.

Power is a drug that every state wants and can never seem to have enough. In the Syrian war, power can be explained as states are not equal, and there is a hierarchy in the world that needs to be followed. States run after their self-interest and tend to move up in the hierarchy as they gain power; power gained by the states is mostly through expanding their military, which allows them to fight and keep their authority. Kali Robinson explains that Iran wanted Syria to help her grow the military power by funding Hezbollah to use them to threaten Sunni extremist groups, the U.S. and Israel. [\(Robinson 2020\)](#). The same was done by Saudi Arabia, who wanted to overthrow the Alawite government of President Bashar and support the rebel groups that were mostly made up of Sunnis. Turkey and Qatar also followed Saudi and supported the Sunnis establishing themselves as a power in the region.

Realists also agree to the fact that too much power can prove to be deadly; "when a state grows vastly more powerful than any opponent, realists expect that it will eventually use that power to expand its sphere of domination, whether for security, wealth, or other motives," says Jack Snyder [\(Snyder 2009\)](#). Since Russia and Iran already knew that their regional revivals would pose a threat to their power, they started to act in advance, supporting President Bashar through thick and thin; realists refer to this as the "security dilemma" [\(Dunne and Smith 2011\)](#). A 'security dilemma' is when a country pursues power and security by pushing its rivals out of competition; the idea of balance of power remains irrelevant.

Realists argue that a conflict can be resolved when the balance of power is reinstated. Nevertheless, in the case of the Syria war balance of power could not be reinstated because the country itself failed to function smoothly due to the religious and ethnic war between Sunni and Shia. Sunni rebel groups who are ethnically and religiously closer to Saudi Arabia no longer wanted a Shia leader closer to Iran. Thus, with its financial and military resources, Iran left no stone unturned while helping its ally President Bashar. For Iran, if President Bashar was removed from his position, it would mean the end of the Iran and Syria alliance and another partner for Saudi Arabia. The region's balance of power was a significant reason for Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Gulf States, the US, Iran, and Russia to intervene in the Syrian war actively.

Conclusion

The Syrian war is stuck in a never-ending spiral, but it is imperative to end the conflict once and for all; the critical question is what can domestic and international actors do to end the nine-year-long way

and how can they initiate peace so that the millions who are internally and externally displaced can return to their home? Most importantly, what can the international system do for such a conflict to never take place? Realists explain that a self-help system should be set in place, the fear of 'security dilemma' can be solved with the help of a balance of power in the region, and power politics should have the last say so that every nation can contribute to the region in the best way possible. Jack Snyder explains, "realism claimed to be an antidote to the naive belief that international institutions and law alone can preserve peace." The fact that no one can stop a nation from supporting who it wants is the problem. Every country must understand its social responsibility towards the international system and understand the importance of the role played by I.O.s. Realists explain, "all other actors in world politics — individuals, international organizations (IGOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), etc. — are either far less important or unimportant" (Jackson, R. H., and Sorensen, G., 2016). Nations have failed to follow I.O. mandate(s). The only solution to end the Syrian war and restore peace is by reinstating the balance of power because I.O.s cannot resolve their issues peacefully through dialogue. The Syrian conflict can only end with the success of either President Bashar and his allies or the opposition and their allies.

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