

Power Politics Problems and Intervention in Syria

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After three years of bloody fighting, a devastating chemical attack, and what appears to be sectarian cleansing of urban areas, the conflict in Syria rages but the international community refuses to intervene militarily. Why is this so? Realist logic, as in many cases, offers choices. Given avowed US support for the rebels and the breach of international norms presented by the chemical attacks and other crimes against humanity, why does the international community choose inaction? Four explanations currently present themselves: 1) the opposition is not unified and is made up of untrustworthy actors, 2) the situation on the ground is too complex and US/UN intervention would do more harm than good, 3) the Arab States are reluctant to request intervention, 4) Russia and China are blocking UN Security Council actions. Following the model presented by Samantha Power in *The Problem from Hell*, we maintain that these arguments do not explain US resistance to intervene, but instead serve as justifications for not intervening. We will argue that, absent clear realist benefits, US domestic politics will determine whether the US undertakes humanitarian intervention. This suggests two conclusions: one theoretical and one practical. Theoretically, humanitarian intervention may be driven more by internal politics of the great powers than realist power calculations, making domestic politics a key driver of international behavior. Practically, it means that international activists should spend their time lobbying the US, the legislature in particular, instead of the international community.

A Problem from Hell

In her book, *The Problem from Hell: America in the Age of Genocide*, Samantha Power argues, “It is in the realm of domestic politics that the battle to stop genocide is lost. American political leaders interpret society-wide silence as an indicator of public indifference. They reason that they will incur no costs if the United States remains uninvolved but will face steep risks if they engage.”¹ She looks at eight cases of genocide and argues that the United States has been reluctant to intervene in all those cases. In the two cases where they did intervene: Bosnia and Kosovo, it was domestic political pressure that forced the American administration to act.

Why look at the US? “First, the United States’ decisions to act or not to act have had a greater impact on the victims’ fortunes than those of any other major power. Second, since World War II, the United States has had a tremendous capacity to curb genocide. It could have used its vast resources to do so without undermining U.S. security. Third, the United States has made an unusually pronounced commitment to Holocaust commemoration and education... Fourth, in recent years American leaders, steeped in a new culture of Holocaust awareness, have repeatedly committed themselves to preventing the recurrence of genocide.”²

Several of her cases, including Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge and Iraq’s gassing and displacement of Kurds in 1988 took place in the context of the Cold War, which suggest that realist power politics might be a good explanation. Power argues that in the Cambodian case it was primarily driven by exhaustion and mistrust of government after Vietnam, as well as a lack of strong domestic constituencies pushing another analogy.³ Given the bipolar configuration of the Cold War, however, the offending parties in Cambodia and Iraq were at least enemies of an

¹ Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*, (Harper Perennial, New York, 2007), pp. xviii

² Power, *A Problem from Hell*, pp. xx-xxi

³ Power, *A Problem from Hell*, pp. 90

enemy, if not a friend, so while Power focuses on domestic issues, realist power calculations can't easily be ruled out. Other cases call that into question, however: The Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust each took place during wartime, but were being committed by enemies. As enemies, one would expect every tool would have been used against them, but in neither case did the US make ending genocide a war aim. In WWII, the argument was that winning the war would solve the problem, that in the meantime making it an issue could lead to worse behavior, or that the actions were too horrible to be credible. In the case of the Armenian Genocide, the US never declared war on the Ottoman Empire and feared that speaking out against the genocide would hurt the American educational and religious missions in Turkey, lead to more brutal behavior by the regime, and, likely, affect economic interests after the war. The more recent cases, including Rwanda, Bosnia, and Kosovo, suggest that the realist position might not explain the differences. The US has acted the same in all cases, no matter the power configuration. In all cases they: 1) Failed to muster the imagination to really believe that genocide was taking place. It was too irrational to be believed, even with clear evidence; 2) Did little, not only abstaining from sending its troops, but taking very few steps along a continuum of intervention to deter genocide; 3) Spun themselves to convince themselves that the violence was two-sided and inevitable, not genocide, that intervention was futile or counterproductive, and that anyone who thought otherwise was emotional and incapable of the rational thinking necessary for international politics.⁴ However, in Bosnia and Kosovo (as well as Somalia) domestic political pressure forced American presidents to commit troops where they were reluctant to do so and where the realist power dynamics were at best murky if not non-existent.

In Power's argument pure political realism does not explain the variation in US responses to genocide, it is better explained by domestic politics. I would argue that you could add here any

⁴ Power, *A Problem from Hell*, pp. xviii

humanitarian intervention. Realism suggests not only caution in the international realm, but also the judicious seizing of opportunities. In most of these cases, the US faced minimal risk and reward was available, whether that was the end of an old enemy, expanding influence onto successor governments, or reinforcing humanitarian norms that the US relies upon to maintain an international order that is favorable to its interests. Power suggests that more than realism, there is a general tendency toward risk-avoidance and that presidents (and their aides) fear the domestic consequences of losses of action more than they anticipate the gains. It is only when concerted lobbying by domestic groups, including the American legislature, raises the cost of inaction that the US will choose to intervene. In the domestic realm it becomes a contest of perceptions. Despite evidence, the US will often refuse to call a crisis genocide, fearing that it will morally (or politically) demand action. They spin themselves, and others, to view the situation as more dangerous or complex than it is, using the concepts of “perversity, futility, and jeopardy,” and making analogies to failed wars and interventions. Proponents of action will use other analogies, such as comparing an event to the Holocaust and referring to previous, successful interventions.

Martha Finnemore supports this argument. She focuses on the international normative conditions for changing ideas of where and how to intervene, but argues that in the cases she studies: “Realist and neoliberal theories do not provide explanations for this behavior... many or most of these interventions occur in states of negligible geostrategic or economic importance to the intervenors.”⁵ She argues that, while “humanitarian action was never taken when it jeopardized other articulated goals or interests of a state,” even in the 19th Century, pressure from domestic public opinion and international pressure groups, “did succeed in creating new interests

⁵ Martha Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention: changing beliefs about the use of force*, (Cornell University, 2003), 52

and new reasons to act where none had existed.”⁶ That is, when geostrategic interests are not clear or pressing, domestic opinion, aided by transnational civil society, can pressure leaders to intervene where they might prefer not to.

The second aspect of the argument is whether the US can, alone, determine outcomes. The US does not have the power or foresight to determine every outcome. However, we will argue that if the US wants to move, it can, and a significant number of countries will go along. Perhaps more importantly, if the US doesn’t want to underwrite the action, it probably won’t happen. So, if activists want intervention, it is a matter of creating domestic pressure in the United States, primarily through the legislature.

Samantha Power uses Albert O Hirschman’s framework as presented in, *The Rhetoric of Reaction*, where he identified the way opponents of change use the arguments of “perversity, futility, and jeopardy” to argue against action. Hirschman argues that reactionaries, who want to resist or roll back change, will overemphasize these problems.⁷ Those who want action must answer them. Taken in reverse, jeopardy refers to exaggerating the risk; futility refers to showing that the situation cannot be helped; and perversity refers to the idea that even if you did intervene it would only make the situation worse. There is a fourth argument that opponents of a policy use to stifle action that Hirschman doesn’t place in his framework but that Power shows is prevalent, and that it is a retreat into “legality.” In this view, opponents of change can use the ‘letter of the law’ to justify inaction. This is particularly galling to Power in the case of Rwanda, where The State Department Legal Adviser’s Office argued that jamming the genocidaire’s radio broadcasts was illegal under international broadcasting agreements.⁸ When groups want to prevent change,

⁶ Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention*, 65

⁷ Albert O. Hirschman, *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy*, (Belknap Press, Cambridge, MA 1991), pp.7-8

⁸ Power, *A Problem from Hell*, pp. 371

they often retreat to a position of strict interpretation of the law, whereas they are more likely to view the law as more flexible when they want to intervene.

In general, we will argue, with Ikenberry et al, that absent the clear pressures of bipolarity, realist power calculations cannot fully explain state behavior.⁹ When the international system is less constrained, as in multipolarity or unipolarity, internal state characteristics will have a determining influence on state actions.¹⁰ In Power's view, this results in a general reluctance by American policymakers to intervene in genocide, while at the same time they feel political pressure to do so. In order to justify non-intervention, executive branch actors argue constraints of perversity, futility, jeopardy, and legality. In particular, they do this through the use of analogy. Opponents of intervention make analogies to failed interventions, while proponents use analogies of successful interventions, or times when lack of intervention produced a clear moral failure. It is this domestic conflict over analogy that determines whether the US will intervene. We can see this in particular when opponents become proponents and analogies shift, such as in the case of Syria. When the US was seriously considering intervention after the Syrian regime's chemical attacks, their analogies began to include the Kosovo intervention, whereas they had primarily used Iraq as an analogy when they were trying to avoid committing to intervention.

Syria

In Syria, there are strong power politics arguments to be made for different courses of action, including direct intervention, backing the Assad regime as a known (if not friendly)

⁹ Accepting for argument's sake that bipolarity in realism really does offer crystal clear prescriptions.

¹⁰ G. John Ikenberry, Michael Mastanduno and William C. Wohlforth, "Introduction: Unipolarity, State Behavior, and Systemic Consequences," *World Politics*, Vol. 61, No. 1, International Relations Theory and the Consequences of Unipolarity (Jan., 2009), pp. 16-18

quantity, and purposefully exacerbating the conflict (as some more radical voices argue the US is doing). Intervention is risky, but as Emile Hokayem points out, for the United States' Gulf allies, (and thus potentially for the United States),

The strategic rationale for overthrowing Assad was compelling: it would reverse Iran's reach in the Levant; contribute to the weakening of Hizbullah in Lebanon; make up for the perceived loss of Iraq and perhaps embolden Sunni opposition to the Shia dominated central government in Baghdad; punish Assad for his alliances and previous behaviour; recover the Palestinian card from the grip of the rejectionist camp; and bring to power an allied, possibly compliant Sunni leadership.¹¹

Liberal international relations theory also suggests a pretty clear argument for intervention.

Democracies are peaceful and predictable, if you have a good chance to turn an autocracy into a democracy, you should risk it. But, if realism, or power politics, offers different choices, how does a leader choose between them? In debating whether the US should lead an international intervention in Syria, primarily meaning a no-fly zone, we can see four major arguments against it: 1) the opposition is not unified and is made up of untrustworthy actors, 2) the situation on the ground is too complex and US/UN intervention would do more harm than good, 3) the Arab States are reluctant to request intervention, 4) Russia and China are blocking UN Security Council actions. Opponents usually point to the Iraq invasion of 2003 as an analogy, a failure that has a strong hold on current American politics, and try to downplay the similarities with the 2011 Libya intervention. Proponents, on the other hand, tend to use Kosovo in 1999 as an analogy, an intervention that is viewed as more successful. I will argue that the use of these analogies is primarily instrumental; a means to deflect calls for intervention that the US executive is reluctant to take on but might feel is a moral requirement from the point of view of

¹¹ Emile Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant* (Kindle Edition), (The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), 2013), Kindle Location 1518

domestic politics. In that case, rather than arguing the realist merits for action, it is important for activists to change the frame of reference to one that encourages intervention.

This assumes there is a significant constituency for intervention in Syria. There are certainly those who oppose any western intervention, others who simply want weapons, and others who want a no fly zone. An interesting article by the Syrian activist spoke of her ambivalence. When she was home in Europe, she was against any western intervention, but when she was in Syria she hoped for it.¹² Syrians protestors have asked explicitly for intervention as well. During the early phases of the uprising Friday protests would be given a name that reflected a clear demand for intervention. There was the “No Fly Zone Friday,” “International Protection Friday,” and “Your Silence Kills Us Friday,” July 29, 2011. There is, then, a case to be made that intervention would be appreciated by at least some major actors and thus challenges the moral stance of those who refuse to intervene.

Perversity

Hirschman defines the Perversity Thesis is as that claim that “It is not just that a movement or a policy will fall short of its goal or will occasion unexpected costs or negative side effects: rather, so goes the argument, *the attempt to push society in a certain direction will result in its moving all right, but in the opposite direction.*” As he says, reactionaries (or realists) find it difficult to argue with progressive (or humanitarian) aims and, instead, “will endorse it, sincerely or otherwise, but then attempt to demonstrate that the action proposed or undertaking is ill-conceived; indeed, they will most typically argue that this action will produce, via a chain of unintended consequences, the *exact contrary* of the objective being proclaimed and pursued.”¹³

¹² Find Citation

¹³ Hirschman, *The Rhetoric of Reaction*, pp.11

[Emphasis in original] In the foreign policy realm, this often means using analogies to other failed actions or downplaying similarities with previous successes, while arguing that the intended action will result in the worst outcome that contemporary public opinion would fear.

Samantha Power argues that many American policymakers are prone to “fighting the last war” that is over-identifying any major conflict with the preceding one.¹⁴ This is a common complaint, that policymakers are often trapped by their own experience and, following a failure, too apt to do the opposite of what they had done in the past. I think it might be more apt to say that leaders refer to the war that most matches their preferred analogy. In the case of Syria, the most recent US war was Libya, which many view as a success, but for most the frame of reference in Syria was the failed occupation of Iraq. Granted, the Libya intervention was short, low-cost, and clearer morally. Robert Jervis argues that traumatic experiences are more likely to shape perception of future events, which can account for Iraq looming larger in the public imagination and policymakers’ minds, but he also points out that a triumph against doubters can also create confidence.¹⁵ Given that, one would expect there to be some dispute in the executive branch over which was the most appropriate analogy, and there is evidence that this is the case.¹⁶ Certainly, Iraq was not the only available reference. In several cases, administration officials went to great pains to point out how Syria was different than Libya, which was relatively easy from an American perspective, and shift the framing to think of Syria as more like Iraq. In fact, there are many reasons to think that Iraq is a bad analogy for what is happening in Syria. A better analogy might be the Kosovo air war from 1998-1999, where there was an opposition on the ground that was asking for international intervention, where air power was all that was required, and where a relative peace has been sustained.

¹⁴ Power, *A Problem from Hell*, pp. 409

¹⁵ Robert Jervis, “Hypotheses on Misperception,” *World Politics* 20, no. 3, (Apr. 1968), pp. 454-479

¹⁶ “No Quick Impact in U.S. Arms Plan for Syria Rebels,” *The New York Times*, July 15, 2013

One argument opponents made early in the Syrian uprising was that there was no unified opposition, unlike the Libyan National Transitional Council (NTC). The argument goes that without a unified opposition asking for help and willing to take over, the intervention in Syria couldn't be controlled. Outcomes would be uncertain, increasing the possibility of perverse consequences. Emile Hokayem argues that the Syrian National Council (SNC), put together outside of Syria in the summer of 2011, was divided, vacillating, and affected by outside groups. In particular, both insiders and donors feared the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), which made them reluctant to entrust the SNC with humanitarian or military funding. The SNC's position outside the country also created a divide, physical, philosophical, and practical, between the SNC and the internal militias, particular the Free Syrian Army (FSA).¹⁷ According to this view, presented in news sites throughout the early stages of the conflict, the SNC was unable to control its various components, was made up of untrustworthy actors, and any support could lead to even worse outcomes, including the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and salafist attacks on internal minorities.¹⁸ Jared Markland and Krittika Lalwaney agree in a 2012 paper, arguing, "The SNC's probability of success in the overthrow of the regime is contingent on its ability to unify internally, obtain financial capacity, establish international recognition, and build internal popular support."¹⁹ This contention, that the opposition must be unified and purged of dangerous actors before they could receive support was a common one. Without such agreement, the argument goes, the outcomes would be unpredictable and potentially worse than the problem at hand (at least for the international community).

¹⁷ Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising*, Kindle Location 1190-1290

¹⁸ Find more citations

¹⁹ Jared Markland and Krittika Lalwaney, "The Syrian National Council: A Victorious Opposition?" *IMES Capstone Paper Series*, May 2012, pp. 1

This misstates history (if not contemporary perception), as well as causation, and can be seen as an instance where actors are presenting justifications rather than necessarily engaging in real analysis. The SNC is compared unfavorably with the Libyan NTC, which supposedly was much more unified and moderate, making them better allies for the international interveners. The Libyan NTC did have the benefit of being within the country, while much of the Syrian opposition was outside it, but it is problematic to argue that the SNC was any more divided than the Libyan council. As in Libya, there are many different forces involved, from relatively secular liberals to former Al Qaeda affiliates. The individual brigades and commanders operate independently, which will create problems in forming a new government, and there are many actors who would prefer Syria take a revolutionary path or break into smaller units. In Libya, the divisions are tribal and geographical more than sectarian or political, but Al Qaeda fighters made up a significant portion of the rebel militias in Libya, and still do. They were apparently even responsible for killing a commanding general that had defected from the regime to lead the rebels.²⁰ The divisions might have been hidden because the Libyan NTC was inside the country, not meeting in hotels in Istanbul and available to reporters. They might also have been able to come to temporary agreements because the leaders themselves were under immediate physical threat, but the divisions were real, obvious to anyone with knowledge of Libya, and consequential both during and after the war. Even as the SNC has reformed as the National Coalition of Revolutionary Forces (NC) and purged some of its more problematic members, there is still dissention within the group that potential interveners argue make Syria a bad case for intervention. The SNC probably was more divided and has less control over the militias than the NTC did, but it is a difference of degree, not absence in one and presence in the other. The argument here is that the divisions are used by the international community as an excuse for

²⁰ Find Citation

remaining on the sideline. This is an argument for perversity: ‘If we overthrow Assad, what comes next could be worse.’ Either there will be chaos or an even more dangerous regime will appear.

This narrative is a growing one and is probably increasingly accurate, as the news is full of stories of fighting between Islamist, Al Qaeda, and more nationalist groups. An informant of ours, who has access to Syrian Transitional Council members, argues that the impact of foreign and radical groups was overblown when it was first being reported, fear of Al Qaeda fighters were also used to discourage intervention in Libya after all.²¹ The first problem with this narrative is that it probably started as overblow, but by refusing to intervene earlier, it has become more of a factor. In this case, inaction increased the radicalization of the conflict, making it more difficult to intervene later on. The second problem is that it undercuts the real power that outside forces have to shape the opposition. David L Phillips, in his book “Liberating Kosovo,” shows that there was a split between the moderate Democratic League of Kosova and the more radical Kosovo Liberation Army, also a collection of armed bands without any central control and purported (though in fact mostly illusory) ties to Islamic fundamentalists.²² In the Kosovo case, the very fact that the US chose to recognize the moderate group gave it power resources. In Libya, recognizing the NTC as the legitimate opposition gave it access to resources and international support. The rumors around the current state of the Syrian transitional council is that, following the failed Geneva meetings in March 2014, much of the moderate opposition split because the council had been taken over by allies of Saudi Arabia, who were able to throw around money and influence to help their allies gain control. It is disingenuous to suggest that without a unified opposition, the US cannot act. In a fragmented opposition, it is difficult to

²¹ “The Vacuum After Qaddafi,” *The New York Times*, February 27, 2011

²² David L. Phillips, *Liberating Kosovo: Coercive Diplomacy and US Intervention*, (MIT Press, MA, 2012), pp. 81-88

measure support and resources determining who should lead. If the US chose a side, that would go a long way toward unifying a significant portion of the opposition around its choice. A truly radical breakaway group could prove problematic down the road, but more pragmatic opponents would find they have less access to international resources and legitimacy and would likely join the fold, as in Kosovo. In fact, the US and its allies could go a long way toward creating a unified opposition if it wanted one.

Thus, while the Syrian opposition is, in fact, factionalized, that itself isn't an insurmountable barrier to action. It is to be expected that the Syrian opposition is not unified. The Syrian regime severely cracked down on internal dissent and prevented the formation of alternative forms of association outside of Ba'th party auspices. Given that the regime did its best to abolish civil society, it would likely have been impossible to have a readily organized and unified opposition.²³ An organized opposition, the kind that could maintain coherence under constant violence and threat, is exactly the kind of radical opposition that NATO wouldn't want. The Syrian National Coalition has since been recognized as the only legitimate representative of the Syrian people, by all GCC countries at first, followed by France, the UK, EU and US. Later 100 countries declared recognition, basically leaving out only Russia, China and Iran.²⁴ This recognition came on the bases that the National Coalition represents member of the SNC, in addition to a significantly wider representation of Syrians inside Syrian and in the diaspora. The NC has purged many of the more radical actors, increased its contact with internal forces, and committed to broad representation and rights for minorities. If the prerequisite to intervention is a unified Syrian front, then why has the international community continued to delay

²³ Landis, Jaushua and Pace, Joe, (2007). "The Syrian Opposition", The Washington Quarterly, 30:1, 45-68.

²⁴ "Islamist Rebels Create Dilemma on Syria Policy", BBC News Middle East, 2013: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15798218>

intervention? One could argue that the ‘goal posts have been moved,’ since the opposition has become more unified as the US tries to avoid getting too heavily involved. “Led by the US, several of the NC’s foreign allies demanded political consolidation and greater effectiveness on matters of local governance and humanitarian assistance before upping their direct commitment.”²⁵ In the meantime, countries that might have acted in unison with the US if it took the lead are instead following their own strategies. Saudi Arabia and Qatar are arming different factions, as are private individuals from the rich Gulf emirates, militias on the ground are splitting and realigning in order to attract resources, and Islamist radicals are coming in from outside, creating a more confusing picture on the ground than three years ago. In fact, the continued delay in intervention is helping to create the very perverse circumstances that the politicking for organizational unity was meant to solve.²⁶

Futility

One of the most common claims by opponents of intervention is futility. Hirschman defines the futility thesis a claim that, “in one way or another, any alleged change is, was, or will be largely surface, façade, cosmetic, hence illusory, as the ‘deep’ structures of society remain wholly untouched.” Hirschman argues that this is often argued with a sense of world-weary humor, an attempt to disarm the “alleged earnestness and humorlessness of the believers in progress.”²⁷ In the context of humanitarian intervention, the futility thesis is often couched in terms of ancient hatreds or blaming both sides equally. Whatever set the war off, in this view, is not the real issue. The real issue is the inability of the two groups to get along because of some

²⁵ Hokayem, *Syria’s Uprising*, Kindle Locations 1313-1314

²⁶ Leon Wieseltier, "By Doing Nothing in Syria, Obama Ensured That There Is Nothing We Can Do," *The New Republic*, November 8, 2013

²⁷ Hirschman, *The Rhetoric of Reaction*, pp. 43-45

fundamental and unchangeable hostility. The argument is usually that the conflict is rooted in some deep-seated historical animosity and thus can't be solved by stopping the fighting. In the context of the Yugoslavia conflicts of the 1990s, the first Bush administration in particular argued that the wars were a matter of deep seated historical grievances, "a complex, convoluted conflict that grows out of age-old animosities [and] century-old feuds."²⁸ Implicit in the argument is that the people involved are not rational and the only way the problem will get settled is if there is a winner. Thus, stopping the fighting at this point would just lead to fighting at some later date. Hirschman suggests that futility is thus an opposite argument to perversity, that nothing will change no matter what is done, rather than that change will move in the opposite direction as intended. For that reason, "the two arguments are ordinarily made by different critics – though not always."²⁹ In some cases, the thesis of irrational futility backs up an argument for perversity. The underlying problem can't be solved, so the argument goes, but it can be made worse for 'us' by getting in the middle. Additionally, intervention to help one side may continue a conflict unnecessarily when the only real solution to the problem is to allow one side to win.

David L Phillips argues that the George HW Bush administration saw the wars in Yugoslavia in the wrong light, "as an ethnic conflict rather than a struggle between pro-democracy advocated and a totalitarian central government."³⁰ According to Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger, "It is difficult to explain, but this war is not rational. There is no rationality at all about ethnic conflict. It is gut, it is hatred; it's not for any common set of values or purposes; it just goes on. And that kind of warfare is most difficult to bring to a halt."³¹ In

²⁸ Power, *A Problem from Hell*, pp. 409

²⁹ Hirschman, *The Rhetoric of Reaction*, pp.43-45

³⁰ Phillips, *Liberating Kosovo*, pp. 11

³¹ Power, *A Problem from Hell*, pp. 282

fact, Serbians did claim their rationale went back to the original conquest by the Ottomans in the 14th Century. Phillips on the other hand argues that it was primarily a move for personal power by Milosevic couched in terms of ethnic conflict. Contemporary scholarship rarely accepts the argument of historical animosity, arguing that history can be used by “ethnic entrepreneurs” to create anger, but that it is political act of framing that is the real cause, not the historical animosity that might have remained dormant for years.³²

While it is difficult to end ethnic wars from the outside, it is even more difficult to start them and “ethnic” conflict is often a result of civil wars not their cause. VP Gagnon argues that political elites, as much as they would love to, cannot simply push a button that makes people want to destroy those who were once a neighbor, friend, teacher, or colleague. Elites try to use ethnicity as means of mobilization, but they constantly fail. The only way for them to exert mass control over populations is by fundamentally altering and destroying social realities. “The only way to destroy them (social realities) is through massive violence. In other words, it is the very inability of elites to play the ethnic card as a means to mobilize the population that leads them rely on violence.”³³ Once the war has begun, there can often be a sorting into ethnic, sectarian, or ideological enclaves, but there are often a result of the fighting. Violence, and ethnic war, is a result of strategic and intentional mobilization aimed at achieving specific political ends. Kalyvas’s *Logic of Civil Wars* argues that during civil wars, elites act instrumentally and use violence strategically in order to exert control over territory and population.³⁴ People may move to areas with ethnic or religious brethren, but it is also likely that those identities become activated by the civil war. Civilians under conditions of civil wars respond to violence not due to

³² VP Gagnon, *The Myth of Ethnic War*, (Cornell University Press 2004)

³³ Gagnon, *The Myth of Ethnic War*, pp. 8

³⁴ Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Civil War*, (Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 61

true belief in the cause for fighting, but out of need for survival.³⁵ People may join the fighting, and even adopt a particular ideology or religious fervor, because they happen to be in one sides' area of control or the other, rather than any preexisting ideology. Individuals, he argues, are more likely to join an organization or group and then become radicalized by the social pressures or benefits of that organization than they are to become radicalized individually and seek an organization to join.³⁶ He writes, "Control – regardless of the 'true' preferences of the population – precludes options other than collaboration by creating credible benefits for collaborators, and more importantly, sanctions for defectors."³⁷ In this way, minor differences and historical grievances can be made into deep cleavages and social insecurity that are difficult to repair.

According to Barbara F Walter, those differences can often be repaired, or at least the fighting can end. It is often not a matter of being unable to come to a workable agreement, but instead the inability to trust former friends turned enemies to abide by those agreements and demobilize. Rather than being futile, intervention may be the only way to solve such problems. "If groups are able to obtain third-party enforcement or verification for the treacherous demobilization period and to guarantee each other a significant share of power in the new government, then combatants will implement their settlements. If a third party does not step forward, they will reject this option and continue their war."³⁸ In fact, the futility argument rests on three false principles. First, that ethnic/sectarian differences (or even historically salient grievances) are themselves a cause of violence. Second, that the violence is irrational and thus not amenable to logical response. Third, as a result, mediation and intervention cannot end the fighting. In fact, in most cases the truth is the reverse.

³⁵ Kalyvas, *The Logic of Civil War*, pp.113

³⁶ Kalyvas, *The Logic of Civil War*, pp.45

³⁷ Kalyvas, *The Logic of Civil War*, pp. 145

³⁸ Barbara F Walter, "Designing Transitions from Civil Wars," in Barbara F Walter and Jack Snyder (eds), *Civil Wars, Insecurity, and Intervention*, (Columbia University Press, 1999), pp. 38-39

In Syria, those who argue for the futility of intervening in Syria point to a sectarian conflict between Alawites and Sunnis. Ethnic conflict can't be solved by intervention, hatred is permanent in this view, but a totalitarian aggressor can be stopped and intervention would matter. By framing the issue as one of deep-seated hatred, not only does it argue that the conflict can't be settled by outsiders (futility) it argues that if the currently oppressed side wins, they will be just as brutal as the previous rulers (perversity). Over time, this argument also requires that both sides be blamed for the violence. An aggressor against a victim morally requires a response. Two equal parties fighting one another does not.

Many Syrians argue that the conflict is not primarily sectarian, and it certainly didn't start that way. Alia Malak argues, "While sectarianism has become the vehicle of the Syrian conflict, it was never its impulse."³⁹ In fact, many argue that it was Bashar Assad's specific goal to turn a broad-based and peaceful protest against his regime into a bloody civil war. By reacting with immediate and escalating force, recruiting criminals and tribal allies as militias, and painting the protestors as Islamic extremists and terrorists, "the uprising gradually transformed into a full-fledged and increasingly sectarian civil war."⁴⁰ The Assad regime retrenched, focusing on its core constituencies and foreign supporters. In some cases, sectarian violence by the regime seemed specifically tailored to provoke a sectarian response, driving fence sitters into the regime camp. This exacerbated regional sectarian tensions and served the interests of Gulf States, which had already begun a crackdown on their own Shi'a minorities. "For those seeking to maintain or gain influence in the Middle East, the most proven and expedient method is to invoke and provoke sectarianism and the existential fears that come with it. It's a reliable way to win willing

³⁹ Alia Malak, "The Syria the World Forgot," *The New York Times*, June 8, 2013

⁴⁰ Steven Heydemann, "Syria and the Future of Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 24, Number 4, October 2013, pp. 62

recruits and a constituency — and set the place on fire.”⁴¹ As Ambassador Richard Holbrooke said of Slobodan Milosevic, Assad “often deals with a problem by making a bigger one.”⁴² Rather than showing a weakness that might invite greater protests, Assad provoked a bigger conflict, exacerbating cleavages in the opposition, “promoted exclusionary sectarian mobilization to reinforce defensive solidarity among the regime’s core social base in the Alawite community and non-Muslim minorities,”⁴³ encouraged radicalization he could then claim to be fighting, and internationalized the conflict so that regional supporters felt obliged to defend him for their own interests.

Naming is an important issue in this case. The Syrian opposition was resistant to allowing the conflict to be called a civil war or to militarize the conflict. The regime made sure to argue it was an internal matter of law and order against terrorists as long as possible, while the opposition asserted that it was a one-sided crackdown on peaceful protestors for as long as possible. “Revolutionary activists and their sympathizers have long resisted the ‘civil war’ label, fearing it would unfairly taint their revolution and would suggest an undue political and military equivalence between the regime and its opponents.”⁴⁴ The Free Syrian Army stated explicitly at the beginning that it was only forming to defend protestors. Militarization of the conflict would empower warlords on the ground, endangering the possibility of a political settlement and marginalizing the politicians of the SNC. It would also create an excuse for the international community not to get involved. A brutal crackdown by the regime creates a moral obligation that a civil war does not. It was particularly important to Russia that any UN resolutions about the

⁴¹ Alia Malak, “The Syria the World Forgot,” *The New York Times*, June 8, 2013

⁴² Phillips, *Liberating Kosovo*, pp. 89

⁴³ Heydemann, “Syria and the Future of Authoritarianism,” pp. 62

⁴⁴ Hokayem, *Syria’s Uprising*, Kindle Locations 692-694

Syrian conflict denounce violence on all sides.⁴⁵ A civil war is convoluted and multisided, so the logic goes. There is no good side and no bad side. Both sides are equally to blame; so any intervention would 1) aid a bad actor, 2) fail to solve whatever problem caused the conflict in the first place.

The problem has worsened. Foreign fighters have become more powerful and what started out as a broad-based revolt has turned ever more sectarian. Stephen A Cook writes, “There was a moment early in the Syrian crisis when one could imagine that foreign intervention would have had salutary effects. ...[However] The complex and dreadful evolution of the conflict has shaken the moral and strategic justifications for intervention.” Cook argues that the international community was wrong to see the conflict as unsolvable, but now “It has become a battle among sects and ethnicities over which group of Syrians should control the country; part of a fight for regional leadership involving Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and Iran; and an extension of the battlefield on which al-Qaeda affiliates carry out their messianic violence.”⁴⁶ If it was solvable at one point, intervention has become futile and any outcomes would be perverse.

For those who didn’t want to intervene from the beginning, it was convenient to view the conflict as an immutable sectarian feud that couldn’t be solved by western intervention. It is even easier to do so now, as the conflict has become more sectarian, international, and ideological. What might have been solved three years ago with Assad’s retirement in Tehran might now require a partitioning (or at least federalization) of Syria. However, the stronger argument is that the sectarian conflict was started by political action and can be ended by political action. The futility argument not only misreads the evolution of the conflict, but also misreads its immutability. From the point of view of the intervention literature, sectarian wars are hard to

⁴⁵ Hokayem, *Syria’s Uprising*, Kindle Location 2739

⁴⁶ Stephen A Cook, “In trying to help Syria, an intervention would destroy it,” *The Washington Post*, August 30, 2013

start, and hard to stop, but short of a complete defeat of one side, the conflict can really only be solved with help of the international community.⁴⁷

Jeopardy

The last argument Hirschman defines is to label the situation as too dangerous: jeopardy. As he defines it, the jeopardy thesis “asserts that the proposed change, though perhaps desirable in itself, involves unacceptable costs or consequences of one sort or another.”⁴⁸ This is a simple argument; the costs outweigh the benefits, pure classical realism. In the case of Syria, opponents of intervention argue that Syria has a relatively competent military and any intervention would set off a region-wide war or draw in American ground troops.

The Iraq analogy is clear here. This is an important issue for the current Syria crisis. Military and political leaders in the US make a point to argue that Syria was not Libya and any intervention would be more difficult.⁴⁹ Instead they focus on the issues of sectarianism, a general belief in Arab objection to American intervention, and the specter of being drawn into ground combat. They downplay the relative success of the Libya intervention and argue that any American intervention will lead to an open-ended commitment that will end up with American troops on the ground. This combines the Vietnam argument of mission creep and a quagmire of ever-increasing commitment, with the fear of ‘another Iraq.’ When asked about intervention in Syria, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Martin Dempsey said, “Once we take action,”

⁴⁷ Walter, “Designing Transitions from Civil Wars,” pp. 39

⁴⁸ Hirschman, *The Rhetoric of Reaction*, pp. 81

⁴⁹ Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising*, Kindle Locations 3036

even a no-fly zone he implied, “we should be prepared for what comes next. Deeper involvement is hard to avoid.”⁵⁰

No doubt it is true that an intervention in Libya would be more difficult than Syria. That does not mean it would be particularly dangerous or that, not being the same as Libya, Iraq is the proper analogy. Libya was an ideal situation for aerial intervention. The rebels and regime were clearly separated. Regime forces were on open road in the middle of a desert right next to a sea the US could be said to control. The rebels were armed and had asked for intervention. In Syria, there were no clear front lines at the beginning. The fighting was urban and spread throughout the country. The topography was less friendly and there would no doubt be civilian casualties from any American air strikes. The key regime protection units in Syria are also better trained and equipped. When asked about intervention in Syria, Dempsey called the comparison with Libya amusing.⁵¹ Dempsey warned of mission creep, civilian casualties, perverse outcomes, and ‘that long-range strikes on the Syrian government’s military targets would require “hundreds of aircraft, ships, submarines and other enablers,” with a cost “in the billions.”’⁵²

No doubt an intervention in Syria would be more dangerous and costly than Libya. That does not mean it is necessarily that dangerous. Being the ones to fight the wars, the military is often reluctant to get engaged. And given their control over information, both their own capabilities and their enemies’, and their perceived expertise, they are often difficult to argue with. If the administration is reluctant in the first place, such an argument can serve as perfect cover. In the case of Bosnia, the military proposed vast resources would be necessary:

⁵⁰ Mark Landler and Thom Shanker, “Pentagon Lays Out Options for U.S. Military Effort in Syria,” *The New York Times*, July 22, 2013

⁵¹ Hokayem, *Syria’s Uprising*, Kindle Locations 3036

⁵² Mark Landler and Thom Shanker, “Pentagon Lays Out Options for U.S. Military Effort in Syria,” *The New York Times*, July 22, 2013

When humanitarian land corridors were proposed, according to Scowcroft, the “troops-to-task” estimate came back at 300,000. This was a daunting figure that many independent observers deemed utterly disproportionate to the quality and commitment of the Serb troops attacking unarmed civilians in Bosnia. But military experts proliferated and pontificated, repeatedly citing the impenetrability of the mountainous landscape and the heroic fortitude of Tito’s Partisans in World War II, who tied down the Nazis in pitched battle for months.⁵³

The military, reluctant to intervene, vastly over estimated the resistance and underestimated the ability of air power to change power calculations. Other observers disputed their conclusions, but the military’s access to information and purported expertise served as a shield for those in the administration that were reluctant to intervene already. In the end, the US had one combat casualty in the Kosovo intervention and seven in Bosnia. It is hard to believe that Syria, whose military is still mostly made up of Soviet-era weapons,⁵⁴ could prove a serious opponent. The Syrian military does have some well-trained units and up to date Russian equipment, including air defenses, but given the history of US successes in using air power, it is hard to believe that they would be a credible deterrent. The Syrian regime has been upgrading its forces since the mid-2000s, but it was only in 2007 that the Israeli air force destroyed a nuclear reactor on Syrian territory. The operation was so quick and quiet that neither side even confirmed it had happened for a while.⁵⁵ The US is more likely to lose a few pilots and planes in Syria than in Libya, and the costs would no doubt be higher, but the primary effect of the military assessment may be to discourage intervention, not allow politicians to make informed decisions.

⁵³ Power, *A Problem from Hell*, pp. 284

⁵⁴ Military Balance Files: Syria, The Institute for National Security Studies, Israel, January 2, 2013 <http://inss.web2.moonsite.co.il/uploadimages/SystemFiles/syria.pdf>

⁵⁵ Hokayem, *Syria’s Uprising*, Kindle Locations 3014; 1860

Of course, the costs in most humanitarian interventions are usually measured not in terms of damage to the US position, but damage to American domestic opinion. The Blackhawk Down events in Somalia had no appreciable effects on America's strategic position in terms of lost troops or funds. Any cost was reputational and that cut both ways. Failures, like the ones in Somalia and Haiti, showed the US could not unilaterally determine outcomes with no cost, which may have been seen to weaken its position after its defeat of Saddam Hussein's army in 1991. Leaving after small setbacks also cost them, however. Osama Bin Laden pointed to Somalia as proof that the US could be defeated at relatively low cost.⁵⁶ Again, realist logic offers options.

The cost in Somalia was primarily one of public opinion and internal opposition. How many lives are American citizens willing to sacrifice for a humanitarian end? And who will they blame if that number is exceeded? Republicans in Congress attacked Bill Clinton after the Mogadishu disaster, which of course he had inherited from Bush. Without waiting for a response from broader public opinion or attempting to change it, Clinton called off the Somalia mission the day after he heard about the losses.⁵⁷ This, as Power argues, reflects a general reluctance toward domestic political risk rather than realism.⁵⁸ This risk toward engagement in turn led the Clinton administration not to act in Rwanda. In this case, opponents of intervention argued that another Somalia could kill off any US support for humanitarian intervention, worsen the Congressional Republicans views of the United Nations (which were especially negative at the time), and prevent a public opinion problem.⁵⁹ What resulted was a moral failure that haunts the decision makers who refused to act.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Osama Bin Laden, quoted in Bruce Lawrence (ed), *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama Bin Laden*, (Verso Press, 2005), pp. 54-55

⁵⁷ Power, *A Problem from Hell*, pp. 316

⁵⁸ Power, *A Problem from Hell*, pp. xviii

⁵⁹ Power, *A Problem from Hell*, pp. 364

⁶⁰ PBS and BBC, *Frontline: The Ghosts of Rwanda*, DVD, 2005

Intervention doctrine in the 1990s was dominated first by General Colin Powell and then by Richard Clarke of the National Security Council. The doctrine was informed by caution and the requirement that it be in the interests of the United States and have a clear exit strategy. In the words of Representative David Obey of Wisconsin, the restrictive checklist tried to satisfy the American desire for “zero degree of involvement, and zero degree of risk, and zero degree of pain and confusion.”⁶¹ This, of course, is not necessarily realism. Realism requires the judicious use of power, but requires some degree of daring and risk.⁶² Particularly among the Bush administration, the destruction of Yugoslavia didn’t seem to press on any key American interests. “The war was ‘tragic,’ but the stakes seemed wholly humanitarian.”⁶³ Finnemore argues that humanitarianism, by this point, had become a national interest in some cases,⁶⁴ and the Bush administration recognized that they did have an interest in humanitarian action. The administration saw it as both a domestic political necessity and a demonstration of international leadership that it must be seen to care about humanitarian ends, though they preferred not to get involved in Bosnia. In order to get the credit for humanitarianism without what they assumed would be the greater cost of getting involved in Bosnia, Bush authorized the intervention in Somalia prior to the National Republican Convention.⁶⁵ The Bosnia intervention was more costly in terms of money, but the Somalia intervention turned out to be more costly in terms of American lives and reputation.

The issue of analogy is important in these cases. Those who are against involvement use analogies to failures, while proponents use analogies to successes or instances of inaction that are seen as failures. The question is to what extent those analogies are come by honestly, as failures

⁶¹ Power, *A Problem from Hell*, pp. 342

⁶² Find Citation, Machiavelli

⁶³ Power, *A Problem from Hell*, pp. 262

⁶⁴ Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention*, 4-5

⁶⁵ Power, *A Problem from Hell*, pp. 285; 293

of perception drummed in by traumatic or successful memories,⁶⁶ or whether they are used more instrumentally, to justify a position they would like to take anyway. Many commentators argued that getting involved in Bosnia would lead to another Vietnam, a slow rolling quagmire that would draw in ever more time and resources. Of course, many said the same about the 1991 Iraq War. It was an exceedingly poor analogy; Saddam Hussein had a conventional army in the middle of the desert and had invaded a sovereign country. In Vietnam the US was fighting a guerilla war in the jungle for a state that they had all but installed. The analogy did not convince George HW Bush, who used a World War II frame, constantly comparing Hussein to Hitler and warning against the dangers of appeasement. For Bill Clinton, the first president of the Baby Boomer generation, Vietnam no doubt was his primary frame of reference. It is likely he would have been particularly vulnerable to fear of being drawn into a long war in an area that might not otherwise matter to the US. In Bosnia, supporters of the intervention used a Holocaust frame, pointing to Serb concentration camps and ethnic cleansing. Opponents focused on the Vietnam analogy, even after the US success in defeating Saddam Hussein's army in 1991 was supposed to have cured America's "Vietnam Syndrome." It is not necessarily true that policymakers fight the last war, but instead use analogy to support a position they might hold for other reasons.

In the case of Syria, there are two prongs to the jeopardy argument, downplaying potential similarities with Libya and playing on fears of another Iraq occupation. The first objection is that the Syrian military and air defenses are more competent than Libya's, though Iraq is rarely brought up in these comparisons because of the relative ease of defeating that conventional army. The second prong is to focus on the sectarianism within the conflict, general Arab objection to US intervention, and potential to widen the conflict, playing on the recent failures in Iraq. The key argument, of course, is that eventually the US would have to put troops

⁶⁶ Jervis, "Hypotheses on Misperception," pp. 454-479

on the ground, even if it was just as peacekeepers, and they would then become targets. Here is where the Iraq analogy is most commonly used. No matter the reason, the argument goes, Americans would be seen as occupiers by someone and attacked. This is probably not entirely untrue, but by invoking the Iraq analogy, opponents of intervention disguise the real differences. Most importantly, there is an active opposition on the ground in Syria, some of whom want international intervention. I have no doubt many Iraqis were happy to see the end of Hussein, but the invasion did not have the defensible justification or built in constituency that is available in Syria. Here, again, Kosovo is a good example, but so is Libya. Certainly, many Libyans distrust the US and its intervention, but there was also significant support for the US during and after the intervention. This doesn't mean there would be no American casualties on the ground in Syria, but by driving the conversation toward the worst-case scenario, opponents can obscure the real opportunities involved. Iraq is, of course, more consequential in current American thinking than Libya, so it serves as a good boogeyman against anyone who might want to intervene, but it is also a dubious analogy.

By focusing on the potential jeopardy of the situation and by playing up analogies of failure and playing down analogies of success, those reluctant to intervene attempt to minimize public pressure to risk an intervention that they might otherwise be pressed to undertake for both domestic and international reputational reasons. The military, always reluctant to take risks, will often use its advantage in information and expertise to overstate the jeopardy and discourage policymakers. The authors do not have the expertise to know how strong the Syrian defenses actually are, so we cannot say in any particular instance that the military is overstating its claims. Though we can point to the fact that, as much trouble as the US has with occupation, they seem never to have trouble with air power and that the military has often underestimated the ability to

force change with only air power. As General Wesley Clark put it, “The Pentagon is always going to be the last to want to intervene... It is up to the civilians to tell us they want to do something and we’ll figure out how to do it.”⁶⁷

Legality

Hirschman doesn’t specifically mention legality as one of the standard rhetorical moves reactionaries use to block change, but it is important in this case. The legality arguments can be tied to other arguments, such as futility and jeopardy, but they are also used a separate defense by those who want to delay or block action. In the case of Syria, the primary issue is the lack of progress in the UN Security Council and secondarily the Arab League. Those who oppose action can always point to the fact that the Arab League hasn’t officially requested intervention and that Russia and China are blocking any UN action. This is not completely disingenuous, it would be easier to act with that backing, but again the argument uses differences with the Libya intervention to disguise both the capability to move without UN approval and the ability of the US and its allies to press for recognition in other international bodies, including the Arab League.

Power describes the retreat into legality particularly clearly during the Rwanda genocide. Very few in the Clinton administration or the military wanted to get involved in Rwanda. They feared that, as in Somalia, any UN presence on the ground would eventually drag in American forces. So, the US did its best to remove peacekeepers to reduce the possibility. When international and domestic pressure mounted and parts of the government were pressing for some action, other parts were blocking that action, often using dubious and flimsy legal rationales. Unwilling to get move down what they believed to be a slippery slope toward intervention, the

⁶⁷ Power, *A Problem from Hell*, pp. 372

military, and State Department, blocked any attempt to do anything short of military intervention. When it was suggested that the military should block the radio broadcasts that the Rwandan genocidaires were using to coordinate their actions, the military balked at the expense and “the State Department Legal Adviser’s Office issued a finding against radio jamming, citing international broadcasting agreements and the American commitment to free speech.”⁶⁸

In Syria, the legal argument is that Russia and China would block any UN Security Council resolution to intervene in Syria. Often, stories point to Vladimir Putin feeling ‘betrayed’ or ‘burned’ by the intervention in Libya. Russia and China had abstained on that vote, which was presented as a defensive mission to protect civilians, but the mission spread to include driving Qaddafi from power. There is an argument to be made that this legal issue actually represents a real question of jeopardy. Russia is actively backing Assad; therefore the US can’t push its own policy. There is an implicit argument that the Russians would do something to block foreign forces if the US chose to act unilaterally. The legal justification for inaction is weak, however, as shown by the Obama administration itself. After the August 2013 chemical weapons attacks attributed to the Syrian regime, the Obama administration was explicitly looking for a way to justify punitive intervention without a UN resolution.⁶⁹

The question is: would they actually fire on the US if they put together credible coalition? I think it is doubtful. Both sides know that open conflict could escalate to nuclear war. Both the US and Russia are opposed to fighting one another, so if the US decided to act using NATO (as they did in Kosovo) Russia might balk, but it wouldn’t actually use its own assets to block the US. If the US fears that they will actually have to fight the Russians in Syria, a real realist jeopardy argument is important. History has show the US Is willing to act with its own ad hoc

⁶⁸ Power, *A Problem from Hell*, pp. 372

⁶⁹ “West Debates Legal Rationale for Syria Strike,” *The New York Times*, August 29, 2013

coalitions when it feels that it is necessary. In that case, the UN issue adds an extra hurdle, but isn't actually a block to US action. The situation in Crimea actually may make the legal argument even less of a problem now. Whatever claim Russia could make about Syrian sovereignty would be hard to back up at this point. The problem is that an intervention in Syria at this point might look like a tit-for-tat response that could lead to an escalation between the US and Russia.

Related to this UN argument is the reluctance of the Arab League to ask for intervention as it did in Libya. This has two aspects, legal and realist. The legality argument is that an Arab League request might justify action without a UN resolution. The second is that an Arab League agreement might lessen the incentives for regional actors to support anti-western guerillas or terror groups to destabilize Syria once the US did intervene. Certainly, Qaddafi had fewer friends than Assad does and Russia did feel burned by the expansion of the mission in Libya. If the Arab League requested NATO or UN intervention, Russia would be hard pressed to maintain its position. But is the Arab League unmovable? They were happy to see the back of Qaddafi, who no one really liked, but were much more reluctant to have another US intervention in the heart of the Arab world. Iraq and Lebanon were both resistant to sanctions against Syria and other states were suspicious of the Gulf States' newfound interventionist stance.⁷⁰ Here is, again, a matter of opponents understating ability the US has to change the calculations of other actors. It is likely that the US or Saudi Arabia could entice Algeria to sign off on multilateral intervention with Arab troops in assistance, as in Libya. Lebanon and Iraq could probably be convinced to abstain from blocking an intervention if there was credible evidence the war would stop spilling over into their borders.

⁷⁰ Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising*, Kindle Locations 2709-2740

Again, Iraq might not be the best analogy. In Kosovo, the US convinced NATO to act outside of the UN, knowing that the Russians wouldn't agree to it publicly. Boris Yeltsin was less bellicose than Putin, and Russia did secretly send in troops to try to take advantage of the situation in Kosovo, but concerted action by NATO was able to deter Russia. There is evidence that some members of the Arab League had to be convinced to ask for action in Libya, they weren't immediately for it⁷¹, but with sufficient US pressure I think they would be able to get a resolution for a no-fly zone in Syria.

Analogies

This is not to argue that a Syria intervention is clearly the best strategy, or that intervening in Syria would undoubtedly be a success. Instead, this paper is challenging the idea that intervention in Syria makes sense from a realist perspective and, more generally, that the realist perspective is what drives decision makers' behavior. In situations where there is not a clear realist logic⁷² domestic political considerations may drive humanitarian action. Without domestic pressure for intervention, the US administration will be reluctant to risk it. Not simply for fear of changing the international balance of power, but for fear public opinion damage done by losing American soldiers in a way that the citizenry might not feel is necessary. In these cases, it becomes a contest of analogies. Domestic groups, including interest groups and administration insiders, will press analogies that argue for their preferred action, whether or not the analogies are necessarily apt. This is most likely partially honest, fear of failure often leads decision makers to consider worst-case scenarios and there might be a recent international relations failure that strongly informs contemporary public, as well as leaders, opinion, such as

⁷¹ Find Citation

⁷² We question whether realist logic is every really "clear," but for the purposes of this paper we will assume there are times when it is.

the 2003 Iraq invasion or Vietnam. For some at least, it is no doubt disingenuous. As Hirschman argues, reactionaries often find they cannot argue against the moral merits of an action, but will play up the dangers of doing anything about it in order to prevent change.⁷³ In the case of intervention, they point to failures of intervention to discourage further intervention. At the same time, proponents point out the similarities between current events and historical successes and, perhaps even more convincingly, times when inaction led to a worse outcome or a sense of moral failure, such as the Holocaust or the Rwandan Genocide.⁷⁴ Without a clear consensus in public opinion, it becomes a conflict over analogies. As the ambassador from Israel said, “In my meetings with American policy makers I often detect a conversation between ghosts... The ghosts of Afghanistan and Iraq are vying with the ghosts of Rwanda and Kosovo.”⁷⁵

So, what about in Syria? The battle of analogies is clear. Those who want intervention talk about Kosovo and Libya, those who don't invoke Iraq. Certainly, the American public is more sensitive to the Iraq comparisons. However, when Obama backed himself into a corner over the chemical weapons issue, even the administration's analogies changed. Suddenly, the administration was talking about Kosovo, not only Iraq. It could also be seen in the press. Between March 1, 2011 and word of the chemical attack attributed to the Syrian regime in August 2013, Kosovo was mentioned in articles on Syrian and intervention 22 times in *The New York Times*. Some of those were regarding Libya as well. That is, there were 22 articles in 30 months. In less than a month between the chemical attack and the deal to remove the weapons, Kosovo was mentioned 24 times, many times in news articles referring to government deliberations. Not all of these were positively comparing Kosovo to Syria, but instead pointing

⁷³ Hirschman, *The Rhetoric of Reaction*, pp.11

⁷⁴ Power, *A Problem from Hell*, pp. 273-278

⁷⁵ “Quick Impact in U.S. Arms Plan for Syria Rebels,” *The New York Times*, July 15, 2013

out how different it was.⁷⁶ However, Kosovo became an important new analogy, prompting headlines like, “Air War in Kosovo Seen as Precedent in Possible Response to Syria Chemical Attack.”⁷⁷ In editorials in particular, Kosovo was mainly used as a positive example, one that would justify US intervention.⁷⁸ After Russia brokered a deal for Syria to give up its chemical weapons Kosovo disappears from the articles, only to reemerge when discussing the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In that case, it was the Russian government using the analogy (very disingenuously) to justify its annexation of the Crimea.⁷⁹ What we see, in this case, is the administration trying to make a case for war using the Kosovo analogy, a success, when it had previously argued against intervention.

Domestic issues became involved. The American public had absorbed the Iraq analogy and didn't want another war. The poisonous politics in the US also played a role. Francis Fukuyama argued just recently in *The New Republic* that the political divide in the US was the cause of America's claimed retreating power.⁸⁰ The Republican Party opposes President Obama no matter what, to the extent of switching sides on an issue when Obama changes his position. Republicans who hit Obama over not intervening then complained about his attempts to intervene. There was a parliamentary vote in the UK that was seen similarly as a rebuke to Cameron as well as a reaction to Iraq War. One wonders if they would have made the same decision had the US been more adamant about intervening.

After the war in Iraq, the American public is much less willing to go to war, particularly in the Middle East. However, Americans have proven to be sympathetic to humanitarian

⁷⁶ “West Debates Legal Rationale for Syria Strike,” *The New York Times*, August 29, 2013

⁷⁷ “Air War in Kosovo Seen as Precedent in Possible Response to Syria Chemical Attack,” *The New York Times*, August 24, 2013

⁷⁸ Nicholas D Kristof, “Reinforce A Norm In Syria,” *The New York Times*, August 29, 2013

⁷⁹ “Citing 'Coup' in Ukraine, Putin Reserves Right to Use Force,” *The New York Times*, March 5, 2014

⁸⁰ Francis Fukuyama, “American Power Is Waning Because Washington Won't Stop Quarreling,” *The New Republic*, March 10, 2014

intervention when the press and politicians have used analogies that they find compelling, such as the Holocaust. Domestic groups, and the atrocities themselves, can pressure the press and the politicians to frame conflicts in ways that benefit the cause of intervention.⁸¹ Though resistance from the executive or unremitting conflict between the parties may prevent any one frame from dominating. A reluctant public may be convinced, but it is more difficult when the parties are in vehement disagreement and thus there is no one dominant frame. In the case of Syria, the Iraq frame might be too deeply ingrained. Some argue that the Obama administrations has been “haunted” by the Iraq analogy, “it’s simply the case that Syria pretty much *is* Iraq for the Obama administration.”⁸² [Emphasis in original] It is true that domestic pressure groups would have a much tougher time selling the American public on a Syria intervention after the 2003 Iraq invasion than they did a Bosnia or Kosovo intervention after the 1991 Iraq War. There are different ways to look at the Syria intervention, however, so if groups want to change the Obama administration’s political calculus, they will have to change the analogy.

Conclusion

The argument essentially is that, absent the supposed clarity of the bipolar Cold War system, realism may suggest many options to increasing power or minimizing risk. Absent clear direction, how do leaders choose? Samantha Power argues that when it comes to genocide (this paper adds humanitarian intervention more broadly) American presidents are risk averse. They assume that the domestic downside of a botched intervention is worse than the upside of a successful one or the downside of not doing anything at all. In those cases, it requires domestic pressure to change the president’s political calculus. Presidents who do not want to intervene, as

⁸¹ Phillips, *Liberating Kosovo*, pp. 23-46

⁸² Alec MacGillis, “The Inconsistency in Obama’s Iraq-Haunted Thinking on Syria,” *The New Republic*, January 31, 2014

well as the defense department which always wants to avoid wars, will argue perversity, futility, and jeopardy to discourage intervention. They will push analogies that resulted in failure to discourage optimism. When pressed, they will retreat into a stringent legality to delay action, even when they are willing to do away with that legality in other circumstances. In the case of Syria, opponents push the Iraq analogy while downplaying the clear and important differences. When the Obama administration felt pressure to intervene after the regime's chemical attack, their own analogies adjusted to include the (relatively) successful Kosovo intervention. It is clear in these cases that these analogies are at least somewhat instrumental and can be manipulated by the executive, but also pressure groups and opposition politicians.

This suggests two conclusions. The first is theoretical, and is that realism or even neo-liberalism is insufficient to explain state behavior, particularly of a dominant power. It is essential to look at domestic politics and the role of international activists. Presidents fear the domestic consequences of failed interventions, but also can be pressured by public opinion into interventions they might prefer to avoid. The second is practical. If activists want international intervention, they must push different analogies, those where intervention was successful, or at least deemed successful by the American public. They should also focus their activism. Rather than trying to convince the whole international community, or even the west, they should concentrate on the US, who can usually find someone to partner with it if it wants to intervene. This will be more difficult given the acrimony in contemporary American politics, but for those who want western intervention, it is essential to make it matter to American politicians.