

United States - Russia Relations and Humanitarian Crises in Syria, 2011-2020

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Abstract

The study examined the impact of United States-Russia relations on humanitarian crises in Syria between 2011 and 2020. Anchored on structural-realist theory, documentary method of data collection and qualitative content analysis, the study interrogated the interconnections between the strategies of interventions by big powers and humanitarian crises in Syria. The study noted that the conflicting national interests of big powers, notably the United States and Russia and their allies are fuelling the Syrian conflict, with serious implication for humanitarian crisis. It thus underscored the need for a reset in US-Russia relations to foster and sustain deeper co-operation between the two great powers and their allies. To mitigate the human suffering and misery attendant to the spiral conflict in Syria, the study opines that the United States and Russia should relinquish their zero-sum game posture and embrace a negotiated solution involving a compromise by conflicting parties on the basis of mutual consent.

Keywords: US-Russia relations, Syrian conflict, Big Powers, Humanitarian Crisis, National Interest.

Introduction

Russia's diplomatic relations with the United States date back to 1809, six years after the latter was recognized by the former. With the outset of Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, the United States vowed not to maintain any formal relations with the Soviet governments. This was, however, reversed in 1933, when normal diplomatic relations between the two countries were restored (Siegel, 1996). During World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union formed alliance against Nazi Germany. This alliance however crumbled after the end of the war in 1945. After the World War II, the United States and Soviet Union became the two dominant actors in the international system with opposing economic and political doctrines (Jones, 2015). The two countries with the support of their respective allies, began a fierce struggle for hegemony known as the Cold War. As a result, the relations between the two countries, in the aftermath the World War II, were characterized by distrust, ideological conflicts, arms race, among others as the two superpowers

attempted to outdo each other in propaganda, military coalitions, political manoeuvring, espionage, proxy wars, and economic aid, and this lasted throughout the period of the Cold War (<https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/jfk-in-history/the-cold-war>).

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the U.S, not only recognized the Russian Federation as the successor to the Soviet Union, but also established formal diplomatic relations anchored on bipartisan strategy aimed at facilitating cooperation on global issues and promoting foreign investment and trade (U.S Department of State, 2020). Thus, began the United States' and Russia's shared interests in nuclear security and non-proliferation, counter-terrorism and violent extremism, climate change among others. Aside this, the United States supported Russia's integration into the global institutions on the one hand, and bilateral cooperation in the area of security primarily to reinforce the foundations of global stability on the other (U.S Department of State, 2020).

Incidentally, Russia ultimately rejected this approach and opted rather for aggressive pursuit of its unilateral interests (Nation & McFaul, 1997). As a result, the US-Russia relations since the end of the Cold War have oscillated from cooperation to confrontation. And this was quite evident in the 1990s, when a period of idealistic hopes of early Russia's quick integration into the West ended, and the relations between Moscow and Washington began to worsen (Suslov, 2013).

Nonetheless, the recent history indicates that cooperation between the U.S. and Russia has twice worked well. These periods, according to Stent (2020, np), include:

the immediate post-9/11, period when Russia assisted the United States in the first phase of the war in Afghanistan, providing information which it had collected from its decade-long war there; and during the 2008-12 period of the 'reset' between Presidents Barack Obama and Dmitry Medvedev, when Moscow and Washington cooperated on arms control, Afghanistan, Iran, and a range of other issues.

Thereafter, relations between the two countries began to deteriorate, particularly when Putin returned to the Kremlin in 2012 (Trenin, 2014). Before then, U.S-Russia relations which appear to have shown evidence of mutually beneficial cooperation in the twilight of the Cold War under Mikhail Gorbachev and continued under Boris Yeltsin, ended with the emergence of

Putin. To this end, it is alleged that under President Vladimir Putin, Russia emerged a global player, capable of competing with the United States for influence, though weaker economically and militarily (Stent, 2020). Nonetheless, it has the potentials to intervene, and it did intervene to thwart U.S. interests. The annexation and occupation in 2014 of the Crimean Peninsula, which had remained part of Ukraine since 1954, in violation of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum in which Russia, the United States, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom had pledged to uphold Ukraine's territorial integrity is a shining example (Litvinenko, 2016). In response, the United States put on hold her political and military relations with Russia.

It also suspended the Bilateral Presidential Commission the two countries jointly founded in 2009. What can be distilled from the foregoing is that the United States is perturbed about the pattern of Russian government's repression and aggression both at home and against its neighbors, unending attacks aimed at weakening the core institutions of the West, adventurism in the Middle East, Africa, and South America, dwindling faith in the democratic and free-market system, among others (U.S Department of State, 2020). While all these have remained a sore point in U.S.-Russian relations, the outset of the Syrian conflict nearly a decade ago is one of the issues currently buffeting the bilateral relations between the two nations.

The Syrian conflict erupted in March, 2011 following the Arab spring which not only toppled the Presidents of Tunisia and Egypt, but also set in motion a chain of uprisings that engulfed several Arab countries. In Syria, the Arab spring rekindled the hope of pro-democracy activists who had waited for an opportunity to let loose their anger. Having endured lack of freedoms and economic woes, the crackdown by the Syrian government on few students who had scrawled anti-government slogans on the walls in support of the Arab Spring was enough to inflame public anger. In utter demonstration of their resentment of the Syrian government, locals took to the streets and peaceful protests erupted (Mostafiz, 2013). Since then, the Syrian conflict has so much festered that the resulting humanitarian crises now constitute one of the formidable threats to stability in the Middle East (Pedram, 2014).

Peace negotiations between the Syrian government and the opposition aimed at mitigating the conflict with a view to achieving a military ceasefire and political transition have yielded meagre returns. In 2012, for instance, the first round of the UN-facilitated talks between

the two parties held in Geneva, Switzerland. In December 2017, the latest round of talks by the two parties failed following disagreement over what should be the role of Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian President in a proposed transitional government (Asseburg, Lacher & Transfeld, 2018).

At present, violence has escalated in Syria. As rebel brigades battle with government forces for the control of cities, towns and country-side, the country is gradually becoming one of the deadliest crises in the 21st century, with the worst humanitarian crises since World War II (Slim, Trombetta & Sida, 2015). For instance, figures from the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees show that no fewer than 170, 000 Syrians have been killed and 9 million uprooted. The figures further indicate that “approximately 2.9 million refugees currently reside in the neighbouring countries of Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt. An additional 6.5 million remain internally displaced. These numbers continue to grow at a rate of around 100,000 people per month” (UNHCR, as cited in Pedram, 2014, np).

Indeed, a range of foreign states have intervened in Syria to shape the contours of the conflict either in favour of the Syrian government or opposition forces, primarily in pursuit of their (foreign states) domestic security goals. To this end, while the Syrian government has enjoyed the support of Lebanese Hezbollah, Iran, and Russia, the United States and a range of regional and European states have backed select portions of the Syrian opposition (European Asylum Support Office, 2019). From this polarization and alignment, it is quite evident that at the centre of the Syrian conflict are two great powers: United States and Russia whose interests and struggle for power have transformed the conflict into a proxy war. The intervention of the big powers notwithstanding, Syria is currently engulfed in a sectarian violence and large-scale displacement, with enormous implications for human security.

The extant literature on the Syrian conflict is rich and illuminating, with majority alluding mostly to the fact that the conflict is used primarily by the external powers to contend for power and influence in the Middle East (Hove & Mutanda, 2015; Muharrem, 2017; Plakoudas (2016) or struggle for access to oil and control of oil pipelines between the United States and Russia (Guner & Dilan 2017; Freeman; 2016; Johnson, 2015; Szénási, 2017). The extant literature notwithstanding, the link between the United States-Russia relations and humanitarian crises in Syria is yet to be accorded adequate and proper scrutiny. Against this backdrop, this study is

poised to interrogate how the strategies of interventions by big powers impact on humanitarian crises in Syria and by so doing fill this knowledge gap.

Theoretical Perspective

The study adopted Structural Realism as a framework for explaining the interconnection between the strategies of intervention by big powers and humanitarian crises in Syria. Structural Realism is an ideological departure from classical realism which maintained that the structure of the international system is what shapes the behaviour of states within the system. Neo-realist scholars such as Waltz (1979); Buzan (1993); Mearsheimer (2001) and several others argued that anarchy inherent in the structure of the international system is the driving force of international politics. Kenneth Waltz who is the major proponent of this theory argued that “the structure of a system is generated by the interaction of its principal part.” In this case the, states are the principal parts of the structure. (Waltz, 1979, p. 72). Waltz further noted that state actions and behaviour are affected by the structure “through socialization of the actors and through competition among them.” To this end when state A and state B interact, each “is not just influencing the other; both are influenced by the situation their interaction creates (Waltz 1979, p.74). In other words, the structure can be seen as the intervening variable between the action of state and their outcomes. Neo-Realist scholars see the cause of all power struggles and rivalries that go on in the international system not as a function of the nature of states but as a function of the structure of the international system. Daily life is essentially a struggle for power, where each state strives not only to be the most powerful actor in the system, but also to ensure that no other state achieves that lofty position (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Waltz (1979) also avers that the structure of international system is affected by the distribution of capabilities and sovereign states are the constitutive units of the international system, and the primary actors in world politics. Hence, apart from the role played by the state as the primary actor in the international system, states are also sovereign entities which recognize no authority above themselves. The overriding goal of each state is to maximize its share of world power, which means gaining power at the expense of other states. But great powers do not merely strive to be the strongest of all the great powers, although that is a welcome outcome.

Their ultimate aim is to be the hegemon—that is, the only great power in the system (Mearsheimer, 2001). On the other hand, Defensive realists to which Kenneth Waltz belongs to, argued that even states inclined to aggression are forced by the anarchic structure of the system to create balances of power instead.

The link between the strategies of intervention by big powers and humanitarian crises in Syria is explained in the light of Structural Realism the United States and Russia have strategic and economic interests in Syria which they are striving to protect. At face value, the U.S government appears to be fighting terrorism in Syria (especially the dangerous ISIS extremists), preventing nuclear proliferation and making sure that the chemical weapons stockpiles in Syria does not fall into the wrong hands. But beneath these false pretences and rhetoric, the goal of United States in Syria is to expel Russia from the Middle East and retain her global hegemony. Indeed, the war in Syria is part of US grand strategy to expel Russia from the Middle East, pursue their policy of regime change and democratization in the region and ultimately retain their global hegemony which is under threat due to gradual structural shift in world power equations. This they strive to achieve by pursuing a policy of regime change to install a puppet regime in Syria and therefore maintain the security of Israel. Another important part of this grand strategy is to ensure access to and free flow of oil in the Middle East and prevent Russia from becoming a hegemonic power in Europe.

On the other hand, Russia is highly interested in Syria, its only ally in the Arab World. Russia is using the Syrian conflict to challenge the US hegemony and reclaim its position in the international system. With the emergence of Putin, Russia has become more assertive in pursuing its national interests. The Western military engagement in Libya has further provided Moscow with a negative reference point over what they perceive as the United States foreign policy which Russia is now resisting in Syria. Indeed, Russia's posture on international action on the Syria crisis has more to do with anxieties about the implications of US power than it does with Syria itself. The relevance of this theory in the understanding of the interconnection between the strategies of intervention by big powers and humanitarian crises in Syria cannot be overemphasized. In effect, the study hypothesized that the strategies of interventions by the big powers worsened the humanitarian crises in Syria

As regards methods of data collection, the study utilized the documentary method to draw relevant qualitative data from books, official documents, journal articles, conference papers, among others. The data were analyzed using content analysis

Strategies of Interventions by the Big Powers in the Syrian Conflict

Since the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011, the big powers mostly comprising of the permanent members of United Nations Security Council (United States, Russia, China, Britain and France) along with other Western Powers and their allies in the Middle East have made several attempts to intervene in the conflict and mediate in the peace process between the Syrian government and the opposition, find a lasting solution that will end the bloodshed in Syria and bring back peace in the war-torn country. However, several of these attempts by the big powers have been unsuccessful because of their conflicting interests in the Syrian conflict. While the US led coalition supports the Syrian opposition and calls for the removal of the Assad regime, Russia and China support the Assad regime and have vetoed United Nations Security Council resolutions aimed at removal of the Assad regime. For instance, in 2012, the Russian Federation and China vetoed two separate Security Council draft resolutions that demanded that all parties in Syria, both Government forces and opposition groups stop all violence and reprisal. The Russian Federation said that the draft resolution sought to send an “unbalanced” message to Syria. In 2014, a draft resolution was also vetoed by Russia and China to the chagrin of other Permanent members. Again, in 2016, the 2016 Draft Resolution 846 was vetoed by Russia while the draft resolution 1026 was vetoed by Russia and China. Table 1 highlights some of the Vetoed United Nations Security Council Resolutions on Syria by its permanent members

Table 1: Some of the Vetoed United Nations Security Council Resolutions on Syria by its permanent members

Date	Draft Resolution	Vetoing Members
4 th October 2011	S/2011/612	China and Russia
4 th February 2012	S/2012/776	China and Russia
19 th July 2012	S/2012/538	China and Russia
24 th May, 2014	S/2014/348	China and Russia
8 th October, 2016	S/2016/846	Russia
5 th December, 2016	S/2016/1026	China and Russia
28 th February, 2017	S/2017/170	Russia, China

12 th April, 2017	S/2017/315	Russia
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Source: Compiled by the researcher from diverse sources

The United States on the other hand is pushing for a negotiated settlement that might involve not keeping al-Assad in power any longer (Shapiro & Charap, 2014). Each of the two power blocs had sought to prevent what they would regard as an undesirable outcome. This had rather prolonged the conflict, worsening the humanitarian crises in Syria and affecting the stability of the Middle East.

Peace Initiatives by the Big Powers

To resolve the Syrian conflict, Russia, in January 2012 and in November 2013, suggested talks in Moscow between the Syrian government and opposition but their proposals were dismissed by the Western powers. In February 2012, Russia proposed that Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, could step down as part of a peace deal, according to a senior negotiator, Former Finnish president and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Martti Ahtisaari who was involved in back-channel discussions at the time. Ahtisaari said western powers failed to seize on the proposal. Ahtisaari held talks with envoys from the five permanent members of the UN Security Council in February 2012. He said that during those discussions, the Russian ambassador, Vitaly Churkin, laid out a three-point plan, which included a proposal for Assad to cede power at some point after peace talks had started between the regime and the opposition. But he said that the US, Britain and France were so convinced that the Syrian dictator was about to fall, they ignored the proposal (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/15/west-ignored-russian-offer-in-2012-to-have-syrias-assad-step-aside>).

In February 2012, France and United States initiated an international "contact group" to find a solution for the Syrian conflict, after Russia and China had vetoed a 4 February 2012 UN Security Council resolution. According to the then US Secretary of State Hilary Rodham Clinton, 'support the Syrian people's right to have a better future'. The Group, sometimes referred to as the 'Friends of Democratic Syria Group', includes about 82 countries, including Australia. At its first meeting in Tunis on 24 February 2012, the Group demanded that violence in Syria cease and that the Syrian Government allow unfettered access by humanitarian groups. The Group also called on the UN to plan to send a peacekeeping force to Syria when the violence

ended. However, there was no agreement in the Group on the question of arming Syrian rebels (Harris, 2012: 14-15). In March–May 2012, hopes were on a United Nations/Arab League plan coordinated by Kofi Annan.

On March 3, 2017, the United Nations’ Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, concluded the last round of Syria peace negotiations in Geneva by saying that it was a step forward because it succeeded in securing a final agenda for another round of talks. It is interesting to note that the new measure of progress in peace talks, according to the United Nations, is to create an agenda for the next round of talks. This reflects exactly how the negotiations in Geneva have become: a goal unto themselves, instead of providing a bridge to end the Syrian crisis, now entering its seventh year (Ziadeh, 2017). Heller (2017) had questioned why the Geneva process is still ongoing after failing several times over the years. He stated that the talks have made scant progress toward a negotiated resolution to the Syrian war and, by all appearances, no breakthrough is forthcoming. The Geneva peace plan failed when Russia rejected US proposal for Assad to step down.

Despite the concerted efforts by the big powers to intervene in Syria and bring an end to the conflict, the different peace plans failed to restore peace and stability in Syria. In interrogating the key reason why the interventions of the big powers in the conflict failed to produce desired results, Al-Fattal (2016) maintained that most of these initiatives were launched by international or regional powers (often missing key players), working on advancing their self-interested myopic agendas or trying to score points against adversaries. Also, these efforts were made without the main parties being present, the Syrians which represent government and opposition groups. On the other hand, Mostafiz (2013) pointed out that regional actors like Saudi Arabia, Israel, Iran and Turkey have different political goals beneath the Syrian conflict, as do the international actors like Russia, U.S., China and EU nations. A peaceful settlement of Syrian conflict would bring benefits for some external and internal actors, while other players would lose existing assets. Thus, the major parties to the conflict have failed to come to an agreement thereby escalating humanitarian crises in Syria.

Humanitarian crises in Syria

The conflict in Syria has created an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. As the Syria crisis continues unabated, civilians continue to bear the brunt of a conflict marked by unparalleled suffering, destruction and disregard for human life. United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) estimates that of an overall population of just fewer than 21.4 million, 13.1 million people require humanitarian assistance, including close to 3 million people in need trapped in besieged and hard-to-reach areas, where they are exposed to grave protection threats. Over half of the population has been forced from their homes, 6.6 million people are internally displaced, and many people have been displaced multiple times. Children and youth comprise more than half of the displaced, as well as half of those in need of humanitarian assistance (<http://www.unocha.org/syrian-arab-republic/about-ocha-syria>).

Again, an estimated 11 million Syrians have fled their homes since the outbreak of the civil war in March 2011. Among those escaping the conflict, the majority have sought refuge in neighbouring countries or within Syria itself. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 4.8 million have fled to Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq, and 6.6 million are internally displaced within Syria. Meanwhile about one million have requested asylum in Europe. Germany, with more than 300,000 cumulated applications, and Sweden with 100,000, are EU's top receiving countries (<http://syrianrefugees.eu/>).

As the war continues, hope is fading fast. Millions of Syrians have escaped across borders, fleeing the bombs and bullets that have devastated their homes. Turkey hosts the largest number of registered Syrian refugees, currently 3.3 million. The vast majority of Syrian refugees in the neighbouring countries live in urban areas, with around only 8 per cent accommodated in refugee camps. In Lebanon, life is a daily struggle for more than a million Syrian refugees, who have little or no financial resources. Around 70 per cent live below the poverty line. There are no formal refugee camps and, as a result, Syrians are scattered throughout more than 2,100 urban and rural communities and locations, often sharing small basic lodgings with other refugee families in overcrowded conditions (<http://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html>). Table 2 depicts the incidence of refugee and displacement crisis in Syria

Table 2: Worsening Syria Refugee and Displacement Crisis

S/no	Date(Month and Year)	Displaced Syrian Population
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1.	January, 2015	3.7 million
2.	March, 2015	3.9 million
3.	July, 2015	4.0 Million
5.	January, 2016	4.6 million
6.	March, 2016	4.7 million
7.	October, 2016	4.8 million
8.	January, 2017	4.6 million
9.	March, 2017	5.2 million
10.	December, 2017	6.6 million

Source: Culled from <http://www.unocha.org/Syria>

Furthermore, in seven years, the casualties of Syria’s civil war have grown from the first handful of protesters shot by government forces to hundreds of thousands of dead. But as the war has dragged on, growing more diffuse and complex, many international monitoring groups have essentially stopped counting. Even the United Nations, which released regular reports on the death toll during the first years of the war, gave its last estimate in 2016, when it relied on 2014 data, in part, and said that it was virtually impossible to verify how many had died. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/13/world/middleeast/syria-death-toll.html>).

More than 400,000 have died because of the Syrian conflict since 2011, according to the World Bank, with 5 million seeking refuge abroad and over 6 million displaced internally, according to UN agencies. By June 2017, the UN also estimated that 540,000 people were still living in besieged areas. According to Spacia (2018) of *New York Times*, the last comprehensive number widely accepted internationally, 470,000 dead was issued by the Syrian Center for Policy Research in 2016. The group, which was based in Damascus until that year, was long seen as one of the most reliable local sources because it was not affiliated with the government or aligned with any opposition group. However, the death toll has been increasing at an alarming rate since 2011 when the war began. In 2017 alone, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) reports that a total of 39,000 people including 10,204 civilians have been killed including 2,298 children and 1,536 women (<http://www.iamsyria.org/death-tolls.html>).

Since the beginning of the conflict in 2011, Syria has witnessed significant challenges in the humanitarian and security situation across the country, an increase in the targeting of civilian infrastructure, indiscriminate attacks and direct attacks on innocent civilians. Human Rights

Watch stated that unlawful attacks against civilians and civilian structures in Syria have persisted, with attacks on medical facilities, schools, and mosques. The Syrian government regained control over opposition-held parts of Aleppo at the end of 2016. In their operation, the Russian-Syrian military coalition conducted indiscriminate air attacks, including strikes on several medical facilities, and used incendiary weapons and cluster munitions (Plakoudas, 2016). The Violations Documentation Center (VDC), a local monitoring group, documented the killing of 446 civilians, including 91 children, in aerial attacks in eastern Aleppo between September 19 and October 18. While the number of civilian deaths in Southern Syria decreased following local ceasefire agreements, unlawful attacks persisted. These attacks have caused temporary or permanent closure of health care facilities, which have become the main targets of the Syrian regime, in a significant escalation of its policy since 2011. In the 14th annual report on the human rights situation in Syria, the Syrian Committee for Human Rights documented 167 attacks against hospitals and medical centers as well as 43 ambulances, 32 fire trucks and a number of cars belonging to Syrian civil defense. They also documented the killing of 62 medical personnel and 44 workers and volunteers in the civil defense and Syrian Red Crescent during 2015 (<http://www.iamasyria.org/death-tolls.html>).

Furthermore, the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) estimated to be 6.6 million is very fluid. Many Syrians, some of whom have been displaced multiple times, leave their homes to escape violence and then return when the conflict in their area decreases. It is not clear how many IDPs are affected by repeated displacements, nor if, how often, they are included in the IDP counts. Many IDPs stay in unofficial shelters, unfinished buildings, makeshift accommodations and unofficial camps. IDPs are predominantly women, children, and the elderly. While humanitarian needs are immense and continue to escalate, access and security in Syria present huge challenges in humanitarian response, particularly for NGOs. \$4.6 billion was required to meet the urgent needs of the most vulnerable Syrians in 2017 (<http://www.iamasyria.org/death-tolls.html>).

Conclusion

The study examined the interconnections between the strategies of interventions by big powers and humanitarian crises in Syria and observed interventions by big powers notably the United

States and Russia and their allies are fuelling conflict in Syria and by implication escalating humanitarian crisis. The unparalleled suffering, destruction, misery and disregard for human life in Syria is horrendous and shocking. Instances of opposing sides breaching ceasefire agreements and indiscriminately attacking hospitals and residential buildings and killing hapless civilians had led to huge civilian casualties including the killing of women and children. The conflicting national interests of big powers and deadly power play and bloodshed being exhibited have once again cast a grim picture of the international system, portraying it for what it truly is; a brutal arena where states look for opportunities to take advantage of each other and to do what it takes to maximize their national interests even at the expense of human lives. To mitigate the conflict and assuage the human suffering and misery in Syria, both the United States and Russia need to relinquish their zero-sum game posture and embrace a negotiated solution involving a compromise by conflicting parties on the basis of mutual consent.

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