



Navigating the Roadblocks: The United States Struggled with Implementing R2P in the Syrian Conflict Under Donald Trump's Administration

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Abstract

The paper examines the doctrine of Responsibility to Protect as a conflict resolution option for the Syrian conflict and the challenges the United States faced, in implementing R2P to protect civilians. The concept of Responsibility to Protect was recognized by the UN General Council in 2005 as a legally binding obligation for member states to respond in conflict situations, where a state fails to protect its people. This study employed qualitative research techniques and thematic analysis to explore the United States' difficulties with implementing R2P in the Syrian conflict under Trump's administration. The paper found three major factors that had contributed to the failure of the United States in implementing R2P in the Syrian conflict under the Trump administration: prioritization of domestic issues, lack of strategic interest and unclear policies, and lack of international support due to previous intervention failures and opposition from Russia and China. The Syrian situation demonstrates that, while the Responsibility to Protect is an ambitious principle with widespread support, it may not always be an effective option for accomplishing its goals.

Keywords: *Responsibility to Protect; Humanitarian Intervention; Syrian Conflict; Donald Trump Administration; US Foreign Policy*

Introduction

At the end of the Second World War, the world desperately needed measures to avoid any future horrific conflicts. The United Nations was created after unsuccessful attempts to establish an International platform that could drive multilateral cooperation, such as the League of Nations after World War I. One of the most insignificant pillars upon which the United Nations was founded, is the ability to defuse international conflict before escalating into fully felt War, avoiding aggression. Despite, its clear intention of maintaining global peace and order, it stresses the importance of upholding the state's sovereignty. No state should interfere in the domestic affairs of another state. In carrying out its mandate, the UN created an atmosphere in which peace and human rights are defended by working with local governments and other state actors, such as by establishing peacekeeping programs. While these measures were in place,

some constraints arose, what could be done if the governments were the culprits? and Can a sovereign country be violated with the justification of preventing mass atrocity?

The Syrian Conflict posed a great concern to the international community since its inception in 2011. The conflict has resulted in mass casualties involving civilians, especially women and children. There have been reports from both local and international source that suggested that the atrocities such as War crimes, crimes against humanity, and mass killings have been carried out by both parties of the conflict, that is the rebels and the Asad government. One of the mechanisms or tools that many believe to be a possibility in intervening in the Syrian conflict within the context of international affairs has been the principle of Responsibility to Protect otherwise known as R2P. The doctrine clearly defined the commitment and responsibility of member states of the international community to act when needed to protect vulnerable civilians in conflict situations from grave crimes which may include, genocide, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, and war crimes. The doctrine has been under heavy scrutiny and debate since its adoption by the UN General Assembly in 2005 (Gallagher & Brown, 2016). However, the implementation of R2P in the Syrian Civil War as a conflict resolution option for the international community comes with a lot of obstacles, especially for the United States during President Trump's administration, and has even received massive criticism from the international community over the prioritization of its national interest while neglecting international efforts and commitment in ensuring that values such human rights, global peace and security are maintained.

Donald Trump became the 45th president of the United States in 2016 after being proclaimed victorious over his famous opponent Hillary Clinton, a Democratic candidate. His presidential campaign marked a crucial moment in American politics, Trump campaigned on a slogan such as "America first". "Build the Wall", and "Make America Great Again" which greatly resonated the majority of his supporters. One of the greatest turning points in the US foreign policy toward the Syrian Conflict was marked by the change of administration in 2016, President Trump shifted from the stance of his predecessor on the crisis in Syrian, Obama administration worked towards minimizing the risks that posed on the US Foreign policy in the Middle East but Trump took a different approach and prioritized other foreign policy objectives such as realigning of the allies of the US in the Syrian conflict which show countries like Turkey taking the leading roles. Furthermore, Trump's administration was presented with an opportunity to make crucial adjustments to its stance on the Syrian crisis, since gaps and lessons of the previous administration should have been a reference point and learning to improve on ways to respond effectively.

Since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War, it has seen not just an increased presence of several extremist groups but has reported the use of chemical weapons on the civilian population involving women and children which has posed a disturbing change of events to the international community. Due to these events that have taken place in the Syrian conflict, the Syrian crisis has assumed a significant position in terms of the United States' foreign policy objective in the Middle East. While the world has numerous ongoing conflicts one particular question remains relevant, why should the United States be concerned about the Syrian Conflict, as raised by Senator Marcos during a congressional meeting on the US foreign policy in 2013? Senator Lieberman tried to respond to this question by stating that the United States should lead the international response in ending the Syrian crisis because the conflict is characterized by numerous human rights violations and the US taking the lead in any initiative will restore the trust and confidence of the United States's allies in the Middle East and beyond (112th Congress, 2nd Session, 2012). Moreover,

Additionally, Ambassador Jones stresses the imperative of US participation in the Syrian conflict to achieve a resolution that will safeguard the security of its regional allies. US involvement in the conflict presents a chance to eliminate terrorist organizations operating in the area. Moreover, he elaborated on how reports of chemical weapon usage during the conflict have raised concerns about

preventing these weapons from falling into unauthorized possession and potentially being deployed against the US and its allies.

The Syrian civil war commenced in March 2011 with protests against President Bashar al-Assad's regime but swiftly evolved into a rebellion and subsequently a full-fledged conflict (Sterling, 2012). The United States supported the rebels, while Russia and Iran backed the Assad government. With an extensive death toll and millions of individuals displaced or seeking refuge, the conflict has entered its eleventh year without any indication of coming to an end shortly. Currently, at a stalemate, all parties involved are actively seeking a resolution. Despite facing limitations as a significant global actor in this conflict, the United States still possesses viable strategies to bring about its conclusion. According to 2019, reports by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) on the Syrian conflict stated that the situation has resulted in one of history's most severe humanitarian emergencies: it has claimed over 400,000 lives lost since 2011, with more than 1.7 million refugees and approximately 4.5 million internally displaced individuals primarily women and children. Urgent humanitarian aid and protection are required by more than 11.7 million people affected by this situation (UNOCHA, 2019).

The principle commonly referred to as R2P, which stands for the Responsibility to Protect, has been advocated by many as a means to end conflicts. This principle was endorsed by United Nations member states at the World Summit in 2005 as a norm within international human rights. As stated in the 2005 World Summit Outcome, states hold responsibility for safeguarding their populations against genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. Additionally, the international community should support states in fulfilling these obligations and enhancing their defense capabilities (United Nations Report, 2009). In cases where a state fails to protect its people from such crimes, the international community needs to be ready to collectively and decisively take action through the Security Council by the United Nations Charter. R2P represents an expansion and development of the concept of humanitarian intervention that many individuals believe could be pivotal in preventing atrocities and offenses against civilians during conflicts across the globe.

The international community has consistently struggled with effectively handling the numerous requests for humanitarian intervention, which involves using forceful measures against a nation to safeguard individuals within its borders from severe harm. In the early 1990s, there were no established guidelines for addressing situations like Somalia, Bosnia, Rwanda, and Kosovo, and this lack of consensus continues to persist today. Disagreements persist regarding whether there exists a legitimate right to intervene, and if so, how such intervention should be carried out and the authority under which it should occur. Following the tragic events of September 11, 2001, policy focus shifted towards different concerns - namely addressing global terrorism and making arguments for preemptive actions against nations suspected of irresponsibly acquiring weapons of mass destruction. Nevertheless, it is crucial to distinguish these issues from those related to humanitarian intervention. While there are indeed shared inquiries that apply to any military action across nations, particularly concerning precautionary principles that ought to be followed universally; one must recognize that matters about intervention in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other locations revolve around defining the boundaries of countries' right to act in self-defense rather than determining their obligation or entitlement to intervene elsewhere to protect individuals who are not their citizens (Erans & Sahnoun, 2002).

This paper will examine the doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect and the U.S. dilemma in its implementation in the Syrian conflict during the Trump administration. It considers the analysis of the earlier experiences of humanitarian intervention such as Libya and applies the studies of these cases to suggest the policy options. Another aspect is the assessment of the legality of possible ways based on the existing international law. In general, the research question is why the United States has not implemented Responsibility to Protect in the Syrian Conflict under Donald Trump. The findings will be presented in a thematic format using both main and sub-topics. Finally, conclusions will be drawn based on the collected

data to verify the findings. The concept of humanitarian intervention, foreign policy and Responsibility to Protect will serve as the basis for this analysis.

Literature Review

In the complex world of global affairs, the Responsibility to protect served philosophically as a beacon of hope, which aimed to protect the lives of innocent civilians from harm. R2P tends to tackle hard and complicated situations in the realm of international affairs like any great vision. According to Borgia (2015), the initial perspective of the R2P doctrine was geared toward creating a principle in which states would have the “obligation to act” based on being members of the international community that protects human life. The doctrine went through its test with reality before becoming a fully felt mechanism. Furthermore, the author went on to deal with the reconstruction of the definition of R2P with a focus on what the doctrine entailed and its weakness in terms of its implementation. Borgia further argued that even though some aspects of the doctrine are in line with International Law, its implementation through the United Nations does raise eyebrows about its legitimacy. In other words its efficacy by using the UN Security Council as its sole enforcers lacks clarity in practice.

Theresa (2011) advanced an extensive argument regarding the pressure exerted on the United States by the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine. She posited that the United States may face situations where intervention is politically or strategically complex, or lacks a direct national interest, thereby impeding its adherence to R2P. According to Theresa, the United States tends to perceive R2P as discretionary rather than obligatory, resulting in inconsistent implementation. She contended that the United States tends to intervene solely in cases where there is a direct national interest while remaining passive in situations where R2P should be applied. This contrasts with the conception of R2P as a norm, where the consistent protection of vulnerable populations is paramount, irrespective of national interest. Overall, Theresa's argument underscores the United States' incomplete adoption of R2P as a norm, instead treating it as a selectively deployable option.

Ajshe (2017) argues that American foreign policy toward the Syrian Civil War shifted during the years 2011 to 2015, becoming increasingly schizophrenic. He contends that the war in Syria became an “escalating stalemate” due to the strategic competition between regional and extra-regional actors, such as Russia, Iran, and the United States. He argues that American policy objectives towards Syria, such as the removal of President Bashar al-Assad, failed to materialize due to the failure of the Obama administration, Congress, and the United Nations Security Council to develop a military solution that would facilitate political objectives. Ajshe contends that this lack of a clear strategy or direction led to a fragmented and inconsistent approach to the Syrian conflict, failing to achieve any meaningful progress toward a resolution. Overall, Ajshe's thesis argues that American foreign policy toward the Syrian Civil War was characterized by a lack of coherence and a failure to achieve its stated objectives.

Orford's book entitled “International Authority and the Responsibility to Protect” provides a fresh perspective. In this context, the concept of responsibility to protect is framed not in terms of humanitarian goals, but as a bold step toward consolidating and strengthening previous practices in the international effort in executing authority. The study provides an original and detailed analysis of several historical, philosophical, and political backgrounds of the concept of responsibility to protect to demonstrate the R2P concept in much deeper roots than it may first appear. The book allows for a look at aspects of the concept that have largely gone unnoticed in the literature. Orford (2011) weaves these threads together to demonstrate that the concept of responsibility to protect did not emerge in a vacuum; it has a long history and greater relevance in the international sphere than we may initially recognize.

Hui-Chol Pak, Hye-Ryon Son, and Son-Kyong Jong (2020) explained their thoughts on the contending debates about the leg of the concept of the responsibility to protect in the context of how states conduct humanitarian intervention around the world. Furthermore, they stated discussions concerning the

concept of R2P have not been conclusive in the scholarly literature on its legality and applicability. The research raises concerns that the principle of R2P can be employed by the West in developing countries such as countries in Africa and Asia as the major driver of the principle is that of the West.

Grover (2018) addresses the opinions of numerous international law and human rights experts in his book “The Responsibility to Protect” regarding the disputed definition and application. Value and practicality of the Responsibility to Protect principle. According to him, the difficult question of whether intervention by States implementing R2P with or without the support of the UN Security Council constitutes a state act of aggression or instead is legitimate and does not violate the offending State's sovereign jurisdiction. Failure to protect civilians from mass atrocity crimes has had a negative influence on world peace and security, making it imperative that the responsibility to protect the concept and its applicability has to be revisited.

Ruth (2021) found that there are inconsistencies in the implementation of the third principle of the R2P in the Case of the Syrian conflict by the United Nations Security Council which has the United States as a member, because of the failure to reach a consensus. These inconsistencies are going to result in inactive foreign policies and to some extent achieving future consensus on matters that involve the implementation of R2P. The study further shows If the UNSC does not take action, proposals for how to successfully implement R2P are part of the consequences of constructive social change. According to the common goals and tenets of the United Nations (UN) Charter, the proposed public policy change would give victims of mass atrocity crimes the chance to obtain protection and security.

Açıkyıldız (2018) articulated the legitimacy of the R2P and the problems of its applicability in the Syrian conflict by focusing on the case of the Syrian conflict as an example of a situation that required the implementation of R2P but the international community failed to do so, even though it has all indications that the state is unable to protect its people from the crimes that are being committed in the Syrian conflict. The author concluded that even though some scholars such as Thakur (2013) and Rieff (2011) argued that R2P is inactive and ineffective and to some extent, many lost hope in the norm of R2P in the international community as a response to conflict all over the world, it is still relevant and can be useful if the United Nations system can implement the norm of the R2P without the problem of veto powers supporting different parties of the conflict.

The development of R2P from an initially advocated principle to a promoted international norm gave way to other debates about its implementation and to what basis states decide to implement based on the principle of preventing mass atrocities and genocides in situations where a state failed to protect its citizens and their international commitment towards implementing R2P or if states implement the R2P based on their national interest. Some of these arguments were extensively explored in Alfajri's article entitled “The Failure of the International Community to Implement Responsibility to Protect in Darfur”. This study focused on the way and manner in which R2P should be implemented taking into consideration the timing of the implementation as the most important part of the principle of R2P is the fast response in preventing mass atrocities and genocide before they occur. The research examines the R2P application in the case of Darfur and to some extent the future implementation options to look at under the pretext of R2P (Alfajri, 2020).

To further explore the problems encountered in implementing the norm of R2P, Marwan examines in his thesis entitled “Responsibility to protect: The Use and The Abuse” about looking at how the international community responded to the War in Iraq in 2003, the Libyan conflict and the Syrian conflict in the perspective of the R2P. Marwan argued that national interest and other political factors to some extent greatly affect the response of the international community in implementing the principle of the R2P. The Author further explored the application of the R2P from a different standpoint putting the case of Iraq and Libyan crises into context (Hameed, 2014).

Bellamy made attempts to answer some of the most fundamental questions about the principle of Responsibility to Protect in his article entitled “The Responsibility to Protect Five Years On” such as the primary function of R2P, whether or not it is a norm, and if it is to what extent, furthermore, what were some of its contributions and achievements on the prevention and mass atrocities and genocide and to what extent it has improved the protection of vulnerable populations in conflict situations. Debates and critics about the implementation of R2P have also been highlighted in this article. Bellamy argued that rather than viewing R2P as a “red flag” to trigger a global response, it is more appropriate to view it as a policy agenda that has to be implemented, or else the R2P principle will only serve as a diplomatic tool in trying to limit states from carrying out mass atrocities and genocide on the civilian population but it would not bring about any effective international action in responding to mass atrocities and genocides (Bellamy, 2010).

According to the above literature presented by this paper, there is a research gap because most previous study of R2P in the case of Syria tends to focus on the application of the concept of R2P in terms of its legitimacy and whether or not it is still relevant as an international norm which could be used to prevent a future crisis that involves mass killing and atrocities of civilian. Although some authors have dwelled on the failure of the United Nations failure to implement R2P as an international response in the Syrian conflict to prevent human rights crimes that occurred during the conflict in Syria none has studied ‘The Failure of the United States to Implement Responsibility to Protect in the Syrian conflict under Donald Trump’s Administration’.

Methodology

This article uses a qualitative approach. According to Bryman, Qualitative research entails an approach that emphasizes textual contents rather than numeric data analysis. Furthermore, Sandelowski states that the Qualitative research approach is a broad term that tends to explain strategies in conducting an inquiry to make findings that explain human behavior, interpretations, understandings, experiences, and the construct of the social world (Hammersley, 2013). This article serves as both a description and an explanation of the topic, explaining the dynamics that led to the U.S. failure to implement R2P in Syria and describing the implementation of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) framework. The study uses literature study techniques to gather sufficient information to describe and explain the main issues by studying and exploring previous research related to the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). Furthermore, thematic analysis was performed on all secondary material in the form of books, papers, journals, and online news outlets relevant to the topic. All data is then evaluated and processed to offer the best explanation for the United States' failure to carry out its Responsibility to Protect in the Syrian war during the Donald Trump presidency. Thematic analysis involves reviewing existing literature to collect data, which is then summarized, classified, and reduced to address the research question (Matthew B. Miles et al., 2018). Findings are presented thematically, incorporating main and sub-topics. Conclusions are drawn to corroborate the findings based on the collected data.

Results and Discussions

The research conducted in this paper has discovered several significant factors that contribute to the lack of progress in addressing the conflict in Syria. These factors include a dearth of international assistance, concerns regarding the potential expansion and negative consequences of intervention, as well as the intricate nature of the conflict itself. To present these findings comprehensively, a thorough thematic analysis will be employed. The approach adopted by the Trump administration toward resolving the Syrian conflict was marked by prioritizing domestic issues and political considerations over upholding the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle in Syria. R2P is an internationally recognized legal principle that places an obligation on states to safeguard their populations from egregious acts such as genocide,

ethnic cleansing, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. Several determinants can be attributed to why implementing R2P in Syria seemingly took a backseat during the tenure of the Trump administration.

Prioritization of Domestic Politics

The Trump administration prioritized domestic issues like the economy and immigration, leaving little attention to foreign policy and Syria. President Trump campaigned on "America First" and pledged to focus on domestic matters and bringing back jobs. This approach influenced the administration's foreign policy, seen through its withdrawal from international agreements, focus on trade deals and economic nationalism. Trump's emphasis on domestic concerns was evident in his campaign themes: immigration restrictions, infrastructure improvement, tax cuts, and repealing Obamacare. It was clear that he had no interest in pursuing or implementing R2P in the Syrian crisis (Waterhouse, 2022).

The Trump Administration's focus on domestic issues rather than implementing the R2P principle in Syria can be understood in the context of its overall foreign policy approach. The administration prioritized an "America First" agenda, which included reducing foreign intervention and withdrawing troops from Syria. President Trump's approach to foreign affairs has been different from prior administrations and is characterized by disorder, driven by ego and personal interests, and influenced by domestic political issues. This indicates that the Trump administration did not have a plan to implement intervention strategies like R2P in Syria (Committee on Foreign Relations, 2020).

First, President Trump's "America First" foreign policy prioritizes the interests of the American people and national security. It reflects his belief that prior administrations allowed other countries to take advantage of the United States, which he sees as in decline. Trump opposes trade deals, favors tariffs to protect American industry, and claims that the world economy harms the US. His foreign policy ideas resonate with a growing sense of disenchantment among many Americans about their country's global role. This discontent stems from perceptions of unequal benefits from global engagement and failures in US foreign policy, such as the Iraq War and Afghanistan. Trump's policy is based on three core assumptions: that the US is overextended abroad, disadvantaged by the global economy, and can find receptive allies in authoritarian countries. He criticizes US military alliances as financially burdensome (Committee on Foreign Relations, 2020, pp. 12–14).

Many analysts believe that Trump's "America First" slogan would have caused Washington to take an isolationist attitude towards foreign crises. However, the first moves made by Trump's administration indicated otherwise. The use of a sniper rifle as their weapon choice reinforced their desire to take a tough approach against ISIS, despite Trump's incongruous declaration. During his campaign, Trump criticized Obama's foreign policy and promised to restore the United States' prestige. It appears that the current President aims to rely on military strength and maintain relationships with Gulf States' allies, which is a major departure from Obama's Middle East policy. Obama attempted to extricate the US from the region by reestablishing a balance of power between regional states and rehabilitating Iran's diplomatic role. Secretary of Defense James Mattis has stated that the objective is no longer just defeating ISIS but annihilating them. He plans to reveal a covert plan for eliminating ISIL within 30 days. While there may not be a significant change in strategy from the previous presidency, there could be language changes and how the United States views its commitment to the Middle East in the long run (Zurzolo, 2017).

Trump prioritized domestic issues during his presidency, as demonstrated by his campaign slogan "Make America Great Again" leading to strict immigration restrictions. Upon taking office, he signed an executive order that banned entry into the United States from seven predominantly Muslim countries and temporarily barred all refugees. This sparked protests and legal challenges, resulting in changes to the executive order. Trump also focused on addressing illegal immigration at the Mexican border, advocating for a wall that Mexico has not agreed to fund. This led to a 35-day government shutdown before a resolution was reached. Trump's cabinet consisted of both experienced Republicans and unconventional

individuals loyal to him but faced criticism for its lack of emphasis on implementing R2P in the Syrian conflict (Waterhouse, 2022).

The Trump administration's failure to prioritize R2P in Syria can be attributed to political considerations. Winning re-election was the administration's main focus, leading to the avoidance of controversial actions and alienation of the President's base. This was evident in the decision to withdraw US troops from Syria, criticized for betraying Kurdish allies in the fight against ISIS. The administration prioritized appeasing its base rather than taking a principled stance on issues, such as implementing R2P in Syria. Instead, limited military interventions and humanitarian aid were provided. (Swan, 2022)

Secondly, the decision of the Trump administration to not implement R2P in Syria had significant consequences. The conflict continued with atrocities committed against civilians by the Assad regime, including the use of chemical weapons. Syrians were forced to flee and the country's infrastructure was destroyed, leading to a severe humanitarian crisis. This decision also impacted the broader Middle East region, contributing to the rise of ISIS and allowing Russia and Iran to increase their influence in Syria. Additionally, it damaged the United States' standing in the international community as a leader in promoting human rights and protecting civilians (Porter, 2017). The Trump administration's decision not to implement R2P in Syria has long-term effects. The conflict and humanitarian crisis in Syria continue today. Future administrations will need to address the crisis and work towards resolving the conflict. The Trump administration prioritized appeasing its base over taking principled stances, including in its approach to the Syrian crisis. By avoiding controversial actions, the administration failed to implement R2P in Syria, which had significant consequences internationally.

Thirdly, the Trump administration's approach to the conflict in Syria lacked clear strategy and communication with key partners. The decision to withdraw troops without consulting allies caused confusion and mistrust. The inconsistent approach hindered efforts to bring about a resolution, as it focused on domestic issues rather than intervening in the conflict. There was also a significant problem of lack of communication with key partners, making coordination difficult. The administration prioritized domestic issues over foreign policy considerations, failing to implement R2P effectively in Syria (Zurzolo, 2017). The US economy changed during the President Obama and President Trump administrations. Under President Obama, the economy began to grow after the 2008 crisis, but it was slow and many Americans struggled. This led to President Trump's America First Doctrine. The unemployment rate dropped from 10% in 2009 to 4.8% in 2016, but wages stayed low and income inequality increased. Americans also felt left behind by outsourcing and trade deals they didn't like (Beyer, 2020).

These economic conditions contributed to the rise of the America First Doctrine of President Trump, which emphasizes putting the interests of American workers and businesses first. Trump campaigned on the promise of bringing back jobs to the United States, renegotiating trade deals, and protecting American industries from foreign competition. He also promised to cut taxes and reduce regulations, which he believed would help businesses grow and create jobs. Since taking office, President Trump has implemented policies aimed at achieving these goals. He has withdrawn the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and renegotiated the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) to include new provisions designed to protect American workers and businesses. He has also imposed tariffs on imports from countries such as China, which he believes are taking advantage of the United States in trade (Moore, 2021).

During the Trump administration, the US experienced low unemployment, strong job growth, and rising GDP. However, concerns about income inequality and long-term economic instability arose. The unemployment rate dropped from 4.8% to 4.1%, the lowest level in over a decade, partially due to the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act. This law aimed to stimulate economic growth but its effects are still being debated. Job growth remained consistently strong with around 200,000 jobs added per month. Consumer

confidence increased as a result of the strong job market, leading to higher spending and economic growth (BBC News, 2020). GDP growth rose from 2.1% in 2016 to 2.9% in 2018 during Trump's presidency, slightly below past decades' average rates. Some experts argue that tax cuts and increased government spending may lead to budget deficits and inflation in the future. Income inequality also became a concern as tax cuts mainly benefited wealthy individuals and corporations while most income growth occurred among the top earners. Trump's policies on trade, immigration, and healthcare received criticism causing market uncertainty (BBC News, 2020).

Limited Strategic Interest

The US has a history of involvement in the Middle East, often for strategic reasons. However, the US may have seen limited interest in getting involved in the Syrian conflict. This could be a major factor in the Trump administration's decision not to prioritize pursuing R2P in Syria. The US has been unable to find a sustainable approach in Syria for nearly a decade. Part of the reason is that Syria is not considered a critical national interest. Iran, Turkey, Russia, and the Assad government prioritize Syria more than the United States does (Miller et al., 2019). US policy toward Syria has been impractical and without clear goals or resources for nearly a decade. Trump's actions have exposed painful truths about US policy towards Syria. The US has played different roles in the conflict - sometimes active participants and sometimes firefighters. Trump's stance contradicted Obama's policy on Syria (Jatta, 2020).

The US has a long history of involvement in the Middle East, particularly in oil resources. The US has been involved in conflicts for strategic reasons, such as securing access to oil and protecting national security. Initially, the US did not see a clear interest in getting involved in the Syrian conflict, which started as a civil war between President Assad's government and opposition groups. The Obama Administration shifted focus from compelling Assad to relinquish power to solely addressing chemical weapons. The issue of chemical weapons was exaggerated. Additionally, the US had just withdrawn troops from Iraq and did not want another costly conflict. However, as the ISIS threat grew, the US became more involved in fighting against them and provided humanitarian aid through organizations like the United Nations and the European Union (Cordesman, 2013).

The US has been criticized for not doing enough to end the conflict in Syria, resulting in many deaths and displacements. Criticisms include an inconsistent policy and support for different groups. While the US has participated in diplomatic efforts, peace has not been achieved. The focus has shifted to withdrawing troops, but humanitarian aid and the fight against ISIS continue. The US initially had limited strategic interest in Syria but became more involved due to ISIS and the need for aid. During the Trump administration, there were calls for the United States to shift its focus from the Middle East to other regions. Indyk, Karlin, and Wittes argue that the US should decrease its military presence in the Middle East and prioritize areas like Asia and Europe with more vital interests. They believe that by focusing on these regions, the US can allocate its resources effectively and achieve its strategic goals. This perspective suggests that the US should reassess its involvement in the Middle East and make strategic adjustments to align with its national interests (Indyk, 2020; Karlin & Wittes, 2019).

The US is focused on securing its allies in the Middle East, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia. The Syrian conflict did not directly threaten these countries, so the US did not see a need to get heavily involved. Another interest is maintaining access to oil resources, but the Syrian conflict did not affect oil production or exports in the region. Ensuring a stable supply of affordable oil is an important part of US foreign policy in the Middle East. Currently, almost half of US consumption is met by domestic oil production, with the rest supplied by Canada, Venezuela, Mexico, and Africa.

Historically, US oil policy in the Middle East focused on ensuring a stable and secure oil supply through diplomacy, aid, and military intervention. To reduce dependence on Middle Eastern oil, the US has promoted alternative energy sources and increased domestic production through drilling and fracking. However, experts predict continued reliance on Middle Eastern oil due to its large reserves and low

production costs (Loris, 2020). US policy focused on preventing Gulf oil from falling into unfriendly hands, as it has a significant impact on the global economy. Due to its dominance over Gulf oil, the United States holds considerable power over these countries (Fandy, 1997). Trump believed that getting involved in the long-term Syrian conflict would destabilize the region and negatively affect US access to oil resources, which could harm the US economy. The Trump administration could not afford to invest in further war if it wanted to achieve its goal of making America great again.

The US has a strategic interest in countering Iran's influence in the region. The Syrian conflict was not seen as a direct threat to this interest as Iran's influence in Syria is mainly through its support of the Assad regime, not through direct military presence. The US counters Iran's influence through diplomatic engagement with other countries in the region, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia, imposing sanctions on Iran, providing military support to countries resisting Iranian influence, conducting airstrikes against Iranian-backed militias, and deploying military forces to protect American interests (Knipp, 2019).

The Syrian conflict was not seen as a direct threat to the US because Iran's influence in Syria was mainly through supporting the Assad regime, rather than having its military presence. Iran's goal in Syria was to maintain the Assad regime and use it as a base for its influence. This is different from Iran's direct military presence in Iraq and Yemen. The US has focused on countering this direct military presence, rather than Iran's political and financial support for Assad. The Trump Administration made significant changes to its Syria policy in 2018, indicating an internal review and differences of opinion between President Trump and senior officials. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson announced that the US would keep troops in Syria to prevent ISIS from regaining power. The US planned stabilization efforts, de-escalation measures, counterterrorism collaboration with allies, support for UN-mediated peace efforts, and targeted reconstruction in former ISIS-controlled areas (Rex, 2018). Limited strategic interest may have prevented greater involvement due to a lack of reliable partners among Syrian opposition forces. The "America first" policy led to an isolationist approach and reduced engagement in international issues like the Syrian conflict.

The Trump administration faced domestic pressures and concerns about involvement in another costly war in the Middle East, which influenced the decision not to prioritize pursuing R2P in Syria. The lack of support from Congress and the American public for intervention in Syria also influenced this decision. Limited strategic interest and a lack of a clear partner on the ground may have been major factors. These factors and a shift towards isolationism all influenced the decision. Consequently, the humanitarian crisis escalated and was left to the international community to address and resolve the conflict.

Lack of International Support

The US approach to Syria reveals a bias against risk. The administration has prioritized the potential harm of action over the disastrous effects of inaction. Despite the worsening crisis and increased risks, the administration's risk assessment has remained unchanged. White House officials have consistently viewed the benefits of action as uncertain and modest while seeing the expected costs as unacceptably high. The administration fears mission creep and struggles to control cascading effects from limited interventions. Due to a strong aversion to risk, the administration has taken a subdued approach to the Syrian war, focusing mainly on addressing humanitarian consequences. It has done less to address Assad's behavior and aims to contain violence within Syria's borders (Heydemann, 2016).

As Syria's conflict progressed, the policies and priorities of the United States and others evolved. However, as of late 2018, they have not been successful in convincing Syrian President Bashar al Asad to step down or bring about significant political changes. The US is still committed to finding a negotiated solution but has accepted Asad's return to power. Military operations by Russia, Iran, Turkey, the US, and Israel in Syria have created new considerations for policymakers. Additionally, the use of chemical

weapons by the Syrian government and international responses to this use have changed how we handle chemical weapons threats (Humud et al., 2016).

During the Trump administration, the United States wanted to intervene in Syria under the principle of R2P due to the civil war and the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government. However, they did not receive support from the United Nations and NATO because of previous experiences in Libya and Afghanistan. The intervention in Libya resulted in overthrowing the government but also created ongoing conflict. In Syria, President Obama lacked authority from Congress and the UN Security Council. Michelle Bentley argues that Obama used chemical weapons as a justification for intervention. President Obama clarified that the "red line" remark was created by the international community, recognizing Syria as a global responsibility. The Trump administration's attempts to pursue R2P in Syria lacked international support (Bentley, 2014).

The international community views R2P as weak due to a lack of legal standards and enforcement. The success of missions carried out under R2P is always questionable. In Libya, the removal of Gaddafi led to political upheaval and competing government parties. Military expenditures, casualties, and unexpected repercussions are visible costs of interventions. The intervention in Afghanistan since 2001 has not stabilized the country or defeated the Taliban, with the conflict continuing for over two decades (Trahan, 2021). The United Nations and NATO are now more cautious about R2P and less willing to support military interventions without a clear post-intervention plan for stabilization and reconstruction. In Syria, the lack of a clear plan for addressing the civil war and humanitarian crisis contributed to a lack of support for intervention efforts by the Trump administration.

The Trump administration faced criticism for not taking enough action to protect civilians from mass atrocities in Syria. They hesitated to intervene without support from international partners like the United Nations and NATO due to a lack of consensus on addressing the crisis. While some countries called for the removal of President al-Assad, others supported the government. Concerns over potential escalation, civilian casualties, and blowback from terrorist groups also influenced their decision-making. Despite these concerns, they did take limited actions such as launching a missile strike in response to a chemical weapons attack. However, their approach was criticized as too cautious and insufficient in protecting civilians. Some experts argue that earlier and stronger intervention could have prevented further escalation of the humanitarian crisis in Syria.

The lack of backing from Russia has been one of the most significant factors for the failure of R2P implementation in Syria. Russia, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, has vetoed resolutions calling for action in Syria. In 2011, Russia and China vetoed sanctions against Syria for its crackdown on protestors. In 2012, they vetoed referring the situation to the International Criminal Court. Russia has also provided military support to the Assad government, enabling its brutal crackdown on the opposition and resulting in countless deaths. Russia's support for Assad goes beyond protecting regional interests. It opposes Western interference and frames the conflict as a battle against "terrorists" and "extremists." The international community is divided - with the US and allies calling for Assad's removal while Russia and Iran back him - hindering efforts to find an acceptable solution (Borshchevskaya, 2022).

The international community is unable to intervene in Syria due to the lack of a clear mandate from the UN Security Council. This has led to reliance on ad-hoc coalitions and limited interventions, such as air strikes and humanitarian aid. The failure to implement R2P in Syria can be attributed to factors like a lack of Russian support, international community disunity, and the absence of a clear UN mandate (BBC News, 2017). The ongoing conflict results in mass atrocities and displacement of Syrians, highlighting the need for a renewed effort that respects R2P principles. The Trump administration's focus on defeating ISIS overshadowed addressing broader Syrian civil war issues. Their military-focused strategy neglected civilian protection and humanitarian aid. Their approach was inconsistent and lacked a clear strategy. Criticism arose when they withdrew troops from Syria in 2019, seen as abandoning

Kurdish ally's instrumental against ISIS. Lack of engagement with the international community also contributed to minimal support for their intervention.

The Trump administration's handling of the humanitarian crisis in Syria and its lack of a clear plan for resolving the conflict were widely criticized by many countries and organizations. The administration's emphasis on combating ISIS in Syria, rather than actively engaging with the international community to address the broader issues of the Syrian civil war, resulted in limited international support for its intervention. Moreover, the Trump administration's approach to the crisis demonstrated hesitancy to invoke R2P (Responsibility to Protect) without backing from key international partners, out of concern for escalating the conflict and endangering civilian lives. This approach faced criticism for insufficiently safeguarding civilians and allowing the conflict to persist and intensify (Barnes & Schmitt, 2019).

Conclusion

The Syrian conflict started in 2011 and since has posed a constant constraint for the international community, especially the United States. The Responsibility to Protect (R2P), which was established to safeguard civilians from mass atrocities has been a central matter of discussions concerning the conflict. However, the Trump administration's failure to effectively implement R2P in Syria shows how complicated the issue is and the challenges faced by the international community.

One reason why the US failed to implement R2P in Syria under Trump was because domestic issues took priority. The administration focused on immigration and healthcare instead of devoting resources to Syria. This lack of attention hindered their ability to address and protect civilians. Limited interest in the conflict also contributed to their failure. The Trump administration faced criticism for not engaging or taking a leadership role in resolving the conflict. This lack of interest hindered their ability to address and protect civilians.

The lack of international support was another contributing factor. Russia and Iran supported the Syrian government, opposing US efforts. This lack of support hindered their ability to address and protect civilians. China and Russia's veto on Security Council resolutions regarding Syria will likely require intervention from at least one world power if not multiple powers. Inaction would not benefit a permanent member of the Council with geopolitical interests at stake. The failure of the US to implement protection principles in Syria demonstrates that failing to act decisively can have severe consequences, as seen in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Syria where human rights violations occurred due to inaction.

While intervening without Security Council authorization would be illegal, it could have saved lives and prevented Russia from gaining influence if done earlier when rebels had more chance of success. Such action would likely be viewed as legitimate by most nations. Future conflicts require decisive collective action based on previous examples like Bosnia and Herzegovina, Libya, and Syria where swift action benefited those affected by conflicts and powers with vested interests. Seeking international and Security Council support is ideal, but unauthorized action may sometimes be necessary.

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