

## THE ROLE OF THE UNITED NATIONS IN THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

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**Abstract:** The Syrian Civil War, since March 2011, has caused extensive displacement and it is one of the most serious humanitarian crises of the 21st century. The war has encompassed state and non-state actors, regional and world powers and the sheer humanitarian catastrophes along with it has challenged the capacity of international institutions in the sense of dealing with the complex crises. This work analyses how well the UN has functioned in regard to the Syrian problem in terms of their involvement in diplomacy, providing humanitarian aid, and holding people accountable for their actions. The methodology employed in this study was qualitative case studies of key United Nations programs developed to address various aspects of the Syrian crisis; these programs include emergency assistance provided via cross-border operations, and mechanisms designed for holding individuals accountable; e.g.; UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria & International Instrumental and Independent Mechanism. Each of these interventions was examined with respect to the key geopolitical limitations such as: Security Council deadlock, veto power, restricted operational capability and regional political dynamics. The results show that even though the UN has played an important role as a provider of humanitarian aid and setting global standards, its efficacy has been limited by structural limitations as well as political divides. These findings have important implications for academic and policy community members who are interested in resolving conflict through international cooperation.

Key words: United Nations, Syrian conflict, Peace and security and Global governance.

### Introduction

The Syrian Civil War represents one of the most visible and complicated conflicts of modern times, drawing in the attention of the world. This conflict began in 2011 when peaceful protests against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad erupted as a result of widespread protests across the Arab world, known as the Arab Spring; however, these protests turned violent very quickly. What started as a series of civil unrests quickly turned

into a complex and protracted civil war with many different armed groups and international military participation. Over 1,000 groups have engaged in armed conflict in Syria, including the loyalist forces (pro-Assad), opposition rebels (anti-Assad), Kurdish militia (YPG), as well as ISIS and other extremist groups. All these factions have incompatible objectives and ideologies; hence, they created a very fragmented and unstable battlefield. The conflict has attracted major powers on the international arena: Russia and Iran have offered the Assad regime significant assistance, whereas the United States, Turkey, and some countries of the Gulf have supported different opposition forces. Despite the fact that the atrocities of war may not be unprecedented in the annals of human history, the fact that, after all, conflict is as old as humanity is, what is new about modern conflict, especially in the twentieth and twenty first century is the existence of international organizations such as the United Nations and its predecessor, the League of Nations. The UN has a mandate as broad and far-reaching as never seen in world history. In the Charter of the UN (Article 1, Chapter I) it explicitly states its main purpose: To ensure international peace and security, and to that end: To take effective collective measures to the prevention and elimination of threats to the peace, and to suppression of acts of aggression or other violations of the peace, and to bring about by peaceful means, and in accordance with the principles of justice and international law, adjustment or settlement of international dispute. With this overarching purpose, the long-term violence and unrest in Syria leads to significant questions regarding the effectiveness of the UN in its peacekeeping mandate. The current paper aims to address the question of the United Nations role in the development of the Syrian conflict and evaluate the effectiveness of its interventions and policy reactions. The discussion will be chronological as it will start with the causes of the crisis.

## **THE SYRIAN CONFLICT: BACKGROUND AND KEY DYNAMICS**

Syria has been in a state of turmoil since the spring of 2011, as the country has become one of the worst hit countries in the wave of Arab Spring uprisings that rocked the Middle East and North Africa. It was a movement that was mainly instigated by grassroots movements that aimed to destroy and overthrow existing authoritarian regimes, which had been ruling the region over decades. With the region experiencing the demise of autocratic leaders in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, most people expected the same to happen in Syria. However, in a remarkable show of calmness in one of the interviews in 2011, the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad assuredly stated that Syria would not be affected at all by such

upheavals. With a cursory glance at Syria's political history, this confidence may seem perplexing. This was not the first time that the country faced a bloody uprising under the rule of Bashar father, Hafez al-Assad, during the late 1970s and early 1980s that was violently suppressed, the most infamous incident being the Hama massacre of 1982. Indications of civil unrest had been manifesting in the dawn of the 21st century, indicating fundamental unrest with the government. The accession of the succession of Bashar al-Assad in the summer of 2000, gave rise to the optimistic expectations that the new Western-educated president would be able to bring forth a period of political reform in the country, as well as soften the oppressive outlook of the regime. Those hopes however soon died away when the regime returned to authoritarian ways, by cracking down on dissent and shutting down any meaningful reforms. Reflectively, the initial years of the Bashar presidency was not a break in history, but a lead up to the long term and violent crisis, which was soon to be experienced in Syria.

Bashar al-Assad, who took over the presidency of Syria in 2000, replacing his father Hafez al-Assad, was quickly faced with the Damascus Spring, a short lived, but major, outburst of political activism and popular calls to democratic reform. At first Bashar al-Assad appeared open to these aspirations of reform. In what was seen as a step towards liberalization, the government freed some of its political detainees and closed its notorious Mezzeh prison in November 2000. But this frankness was short-lived. At the beginning of the year 2001, the regime had started to crack down on the reform movement. Most of the leading activists like, Maumoon al-Homsi and Riad Seif were arrested and accused of trying to illegally change the constitution and causing sectarian tension. Others were sentenced to two to ten years in prison. The forums were also banned by the government and strict censorship was once again in place thus killing the already flimsy hopes of political liberalization and the hopes spawned by the Damascus spring. This quick and harsh crackdown demonstrated that the regime is not ready to give up its power and also highlighted the fact that it is rooted in its authoritarianism. Although there were initial signs of reform, the government led by Bashar al-Assad quickly suppressed political liberties and returned to its former position of dominance and established the precedent of a long period of political oppression that would eventually define the future of Syria in the coming years.<sup>1</sup>

Reaction to the freedoms of the political regime was almost immediately succeeded by a period of partial economic liberalization. As part of its efforts to modernize the stagnant Syrian economy and appease the business elite, the government made efforts including privatising some of the previously state-owned businesses and encouraging market-driven reforms. These policies favoured a small and well-connected group of entrepreneurs essentially cementing the regime and the financial elite of the country. Nevertheless, it did not address the bigger needs of the Syrian people to achieve real political reform, social justice, and increased civil liberties. The distance between the government and people increased, and the society became volatile and disillusioned. Incessant poverty, increasing unemployment and inequality continued to fuel the frustration among the people. It was only a matter of time when the situation would blow out. In 2011, the wave of uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa came as the catalyst in the form of the Arab Spring.

A small city in southern Syria bordering the Jordanian border with a population of about 100,000, Daraa is commonly known as the epicentre of the Syrian Civil War. The movement was instigated after a group of young boys were arrested because they painted anti-government graffiti on government buildings an act that was brutally suppressed. The children were said to have been severely beaten and tortured and this created an outrage among the residents of Daraa. This regional rebellion quickly sparked a nationwide uprising against the institutional oppression of the regime, quickly extending outside of Daraa to other regions. The movement was mostly peaceful during the first eight months, involving peaceful protests and civil disobedience, although in many cases, there were occasional clashes due to the aggression of the police and the mass arrests. The United Nations Human Rights Council passed Resolution S-16/1 on April 29, 2011, officially criticizing the Syrian government in its violent crackdown on protesters, calling to release political prisoners, to stop the use of excessive force, initiate a genuine political dialogue towards an inclusive government, and dispatching a mission to the United Nations High Commissioner of Human Rights to evaluate the situation in Syria.<sup>2</sup> It was however ignored by the Assad regime as many other resolutions that followed it. In July 2011, the repression intensified resulting in the establishment of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) by the Syrian military defectors, which changed peaceful protest to the armed resistance in an organized manner. The war escalated even more in November 2011, when FSA fighters conducted a massive attack on the Harasta Air Force Intelligence Base near Damascus which was widely viewed as the first major clash of the civil war.<sup>3</sup> In

the subsequent events, the situation quickly got out of control as different militia groups came up each pursuing different interests yet united against the regime. Both the government forces and the opposition groups engaged in serious human rights abuses as violence escalated. What once started as a peaceful popular movement had now turned into a long-lasting and complex civil war. The increasing turmoil tore apart the already fragile stability in the country and compelled the international community to address the increasing humanitarian and political crisis in Syria.

### **THE ROLE OF THE UNSC IN THE SYRIAN CONFLICT**

The principle of collective security is the basis of the theoretical foundation of the United Nations Security Council. Collective security is simply the idea that the security of any given state is assured by the common will and efforts of all the member states. As the Latin maxim puts it, “*unus pro omnibus, omnes pro uno*” one for all, all for one. This implies that when there is an act of aggression, the victim will be expected to be helped by all the member states and hence repelling or deterring the threat. Any international aggression or even the threat of aggression at any global, regional, local or even domestic level capable of threatening or violating peace must receive a collective and coordinated answer by all the members of the Security Council under the standards of the United Nations.

Yet, the idea of collective security, notwithstanding its attractive idealism, is based on a few rather important assumptions:

- a) The fact that aggression is condemnable in itself and that the person who commits the act can be easily and undisputedly identified.
- b) That every country will cooperate without question to fight aggression, including by providing military assistance, without getting involved in alliances and power blocs that complicate the response.
- c) The central powers will work together to face threats to peace i.e. they will not engage in a conflict and, despite their own interests, will put the group above individual actions.
- d) That there is no easy or general universal solution to overcome aggression or crisis, and each problem should be approached with a subtle and adaptive response.<sup>4</sup>

The assumptions of collective security do not usually hold at the international level when faced with geopolitical realities. The principle assumes impartiality and the will of everyone to maintain justice but in reality, there are seldom unbiased events in the world. Crises and conflicts often favour some nations to the detriment of others, and hence affect international reactions. These responses are not usually influenced by the strategic, economic, or political interests of powerful states, promoting justice or peace. One such relevant example is the Iran-Iraq war of 1980. Even though war in Iraq broke out with Iraq blatantly invading Iran, a number of the Western powers (and Israel) silently rejoiced at the fight. Their main aim was not to enforce international law but to undermine the newly formed Islamic Republic of Iran, which was considered as a destabilizing power in the area. This episode shows how national interests may supersede so-called moral imperatives of collective security.

In addition, due to the complexity of the contemporary international crises, it is virtually impossible to distinguish between obvious aggressors and victims. The root cause of conflicts is usually a historical, political and ethnic tension that cannot be simply categorized. Consequently, it makes it challenging to implement a uniform framework of collective response. The second assumption of collective security that states will voluntarily sacrifice their own interests to uphold peace rarely manifests in reality since countries do not make sacrifices on the international scene and refuse to cooperate if their interests are at stake. States tend to take a long time to intervene when it does not directly affect their own security or even their strategic position. The history has over and over again demonstrated that in most wars, the major powers tend to take sides and hence aggravate the crisis instead of bringing it to an end. The third presumption that the great powers will unite to protect peace is another aspect that is contradicted by history. Actually, most of the greatest threats to international peace and security have been through actions or rivalries of the major powers themselves. Quite on the contrary, these states can be considered key players in destabilization of areas as they can have conflicting interests. This fact is a stark indictment of collective security as an effective doctrine of world governance.

Since the outbreak of the Syrian crisis and the conclusion of 2018, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) passed twenty-six resolutions that can be used to respond to the multifaceted nature of the crisis. These resolutions cut across vital issues like counterterrorism, provision and coordination of humanitarian assistance, observation of

ceasefires and maintenance of peacekeeping missions. Another of the most striking elements of these initiatives was the international movement towards the destruction of the chemical weapons stocks in Syria. The Council also approved some of the attempts made by other states and organizations that are not a recognized part of the formal UN process to achieve peace through diplomacy. Each of these resolutions shows that there is still a significant but not entirely united effort by members of the international community to use all possible means (through diplomatic means, humanitarian assistance, and using security measures) in order to manage and limit the escalating conflict in Syria.

On the Other hand, while the UN Security Council was busy trying to be operational and efficient, it was also engaged in an extended billable period of conflict even amongst themselves, resulting in full deterioration of functionality. This extreme disruption demonstrated the presence of geopolitical divisions, particularly between the five permanent members of the Security Council and The Eighth uses of veto power assume greater importance during the timeframe. These vetoes usually killed important projects and were indicative of underlying ideological and strategic differences, particularly between the Western powers and Russia or China. Besides these binding resolutions, seven presidential statements were made by the Council. These were non-binding statements but they provided a concerted, though symbolic, alarm among the Council members about different elements in the Syrian conflict.

The key event in the global reaction to the crisis was in April 2012 when the United States and Russia both presented their own independent draft resolutions regarding Syria. Both drafts suggested to send unarmed, 300-member military observer force in accordance with the six-point peace plan that was created by Kofi Annan, the joint special envoy of the United Nations and the Arab League to Syria. However, significant differences existed between the two drafts regarding referral to the six-point plan of the special envoy particularly regarding references to the Syrian government's obligations, adherence to international humanitarian law, the language concerning human rights as well as the conditions required for the 300-strong monitoring force and the operational framework for the observer mission. Ultimately, consensus was reached around the US-proposed draft, which was put to vote and unanimously adopted by the Security Council on 14 April 2012 as Resolution 2042 with the endorsement of all members of the Security Council. The resolution endorsed Kofi Annan's peace plan, originally presented to the Council on 23 February 2012,

and stressed the urgent need for its full and sincere implementation by the Syrian government. The resolution also underscored the importance of ensuring the safety and freedom of movement of the deployed observers in Syria, calling on Syrian authorities to facilitate the necessary conditions for their effective deployment and unimpeded operation.<sup>5</sup>

After the passing of Resolution 2042, Russia tabled another draft resolution in the United Nations Security Council, which was shortly afterwards followed by another resolution in which France had tabled a separate resolution with the support of Germany and Portugal. Although both documents were a result of the efforts of various blocs in the international community, their main aim was one and the same; a cessation of hostilities between the Syrian government and armed opposition groups, and a complete and direct execution of the six-point peace plan developed by Kofi Annan. The resolution led to the deployment of the United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS) which consisted of 300 unarmed military observers with the necessary civilian support staff. The mission that was initially required to serve 90 days had provisions to be extended in case it proved to be effective in curbing violence. All members of the Security Council voted in favour of the resolution and this is a rare moment of agreement since, otherwise, the body has been marked by constant rifts.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, the mission experienced major challenges at the beginning of the mission. The activities of the observers were called to halt on 16 June 2012, less than two months after their deployment, because of the rising insecurity and direct targeting by the armed non-state actors. Regardless of these reverses, the Security Council voted to keep the UN observers in Syria an extra 30 days citing reports by the Secretary-General and by the Council itself that reported an abatement of heavy weaponry and a temporary lull in the hostilities. As a follow-up to this new mandate, the Security Council urged all the parties to provide the safety, freedom of movement and hindrance of the access of the UN observers with the primary responsibility being on the Syrian government. The resolution then asked the Secretary-General to provide an in-depth report on the implementation of its provisions within 15 days but with violence and unrest continuing, the peacekeeping mission was later declared a failure and Kofi Annan as the UN-Arab League Special Envoy to Syria resigned later in the same year, a big blow to the international diplomatic endeavour to achieve a peaceful resolution to the Syrian conflict.<sup>7</sup>

In December 2015, the Security Council recalled its previous resolutions and reaffirmed its commitment to the United Nations Millennium Goals and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It called upon all parties to the Syrian conflict including all armed groups to take urgent steps to protect the Syrian civilian population, including those who are ethnically, nationally, religiously, and socially minority. All parties to the conflict were urged to comply with this call and to afford respect and protection to all parts of the Syrian population. The Council reiterated that the primary responsibility for the protection of the Syrian population rested with the Syrian authorities and underscored the need for a sustainable and lasting political solution which would be inclusive and rooted in the aspirations of the Syrian people. Such a process would need to be Syrian-led. The Council also reaffirmed the importance of all parties' full implementation of resolution 2118 (2013) and of the Geneva Communiqué of 30 June 2012.

In endorsing the Geneva Communiqué and the Vienna statements, the Security Council considered the two joint statements as basic reference frameworks and roadmaps for the political transition in Syria and for managing the Syrian strife with a view to moving toward a comprehensive, inclusive, democratic and healthy governance. Following the military recapture of parts of Aleppo by the Syrian government and its supporters, the UN Security Council on 30 November 2016 resolved to urge the full and immediate implementation of a nationwide ceasefire throughout Syria. The proposed ceasefire was announced by Russia and was introduced to the Security Council as a resolution co-sponsored by Russia and Turkey.<sup>8</sup> Western Council members refused to support the original text of the proposed resolution, but agreed to support it after two key amendments were incorporated into the document. Most notably, the resolution calls for the unhindered passage of humanitarian aid to all parts of the country and the continuation of planned Syria peace talks scheduled to take place in Kazakhstan under the auspices of the UN. Both amendments were agreed to by Russia. Resolution to enforce ceasefire throughout Syria except for AL-NUSRA front and ISIS. Kurd militias, known as the People's Protection Units (YPG), are not covered by the ceasefire. Resolution also calls for Syrian government and opposition to hold direct talks in Kazakhstan on 26 January 2016.

Despite the intensification of fighting on the ground, nearly all United Nations Security Council resolutions concerning Syria relate to the fight against terrorism. On 15 August 2014, the Security Council adopted resolution 2170, which addresses key Syrian

concerns including the country's sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity. The resolution condemns in the strongest terms the ongoing abhorrent actions of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Al-Nusra Front and other individuals, groups and entities associated with Al-Qaeda. The resolution calls for specific steps to combat terrorism, including the identification of those subject to sanctions, including those affiliated with ISIS and Al-Nusra Front, so that their assets, including money and other economic resources, can be frozen and travel restricted. The resolution also reaffirms the arms embargo and calls for measures to prevent the solicitation or recruitment of foreign fighters to come to Syria to fight. The Council condemned such foreign fighters for "contributing to the worsening of the Syrian conflict and to the already very grave humanitarian cost it has caused."<sup>9</sup>

In line with these initiatives, the United Nations Security Council adopted another important resolution on 24 September 2014, which provided an elaborate framework in addressing the rising problem of foreign terrorist fighters. According to this resolution, terrorism in whatever form does not only represent one of the biggest threats to international peace but is also among the most significant challenges to international security. Deeply alarmed by the widespread spread of terrorist networks throughout the world, the council urged international organizations and member states to work together in their effort to curb this rising phenomenon.

As part of the resolution, the council condemned in the strongest terms the increasing violence in Syria, armed confrontations, and the rising death toll, which have led to the loss of tens of thousands of lives. It was further mentioned that more than 13 million Syrians required immediate medical care and humanitarian aid; in addition, six million people within the country have been displaced as a result of this crisis. The resolution appealed to all Syrian factions to take action against the terrorists including ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and other designated terror groups within the country. In addition, the resolution stated that all those who are fighting this war are duty-bound to uphold international humanitarian and human rights law at all times. The council insisted on ensuring the safety of all civilians regardless of any changing dynamics, especially journalists and humanitarian workers. It is also noteworthy that it is the responsibility of the Syrian regime to provide for the safety of civilians.

As a result of increased tensions in Syria and the use of chemical weapons on civilians in August 2013, the U.S. initially imposed sanctions on the Syrian regime, threatening to conduct a limited military operation against it. Further, through an agreement

between the U.S. and Russia, Syria was obligated to provide a detailed inventory of all its chemical weapons arsenal, military equipment, and relevant infrastructure in the course of a week. Additionally, the U.S.-Russia deal called for the shipment of Syria's chemical weapons arsenal to another nation for safe destruction. Following this, the Western powers, along with regional actors like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Turkey, advocated for a binding resolution under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter. The aim of their move was to make Syria comply with the terms of the U.S.-Russia deal, making it obligated to fully cooperate with international chemical weapon inspectors or face military consequences.<sup>10</sup>

In this regard, UN Security Council Resolution 2118, proposed by the U.S., was unanimously adopted. This resolution included a preamble and 21 operative paragraphs. The resolution made a mention of the chemical weapons attack in the suburbs of Damascus on 21 August 2013, without naming any perpetrator. Moreover, the resolution stated that the use of chemical weapons posed a significant threat to international peace and security.

### **THE VETO PROBLEM AND POLITICAL PARALYSIS**

Since the outbreak of the Syrian crisis, Western powers have employed a range of diplomatic and strategic measures aimed at pressuring the government of Bashar al-Assad, often with the broader aim of effecting and facilitating a regime change. Resolutions sponsored by France, Germany, Portugal, the UK, and the US were tabled at the United Nations Security Council from 2011 to 2017. These resolutions were critical of the Syrian government and called for a political transition to remove Assad from power and hold his regime accountable for the alleged crimes committed. However, every attempt to have the resolutions passed was thwarted by the use of the Russian and Chinese vetoes.

Two new resolutions on Syria have been vetoed by the UN Security Council. Moscow and Beijing have called them pointless, saying that they can only increase tensions and encourage terrorists and the Syrian opposition to continue the bloodshed to plunder the country's riches. Both countries are worried about Syria's sovereignty and fear that the West is plotting against her in the same way that it did in Libya. The two vetoed resolutions are outlined in the table below. Russia and China have used their veto at the UN Security Council eight times to block resolutions on Syria. They are against any unilateral Western actions under the guise of 'humanitarian intervention' or 'democratisation'.<sup>11</sup> Thus, this obstructionist strategy has had a significant influence on influencing how international responses have

developed and blocked votes from being approved which they view to be supported by the West. The table below presents a chronological overview of the draft resolutions on Syria that were vetoed at the Security Council between 2011 and 2018, illustrating the extent and frequency of geopolitical deadlock surrounding the crisis.

**Table 1. Resolutions on the Syria. crisis vetoed at the Security Council  
(2011-2018)**

| S. No. | Date             | Draft       | Agenda Resolution                                                                                | Veto cast by Permanent Member(s) |
|--------|------------------|-------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1.     | 4 October 2011   | S/2011/612  | Regime change in Syria and removing Bashar al-Assad from power                                   | First veto by Russia and China   |
| 2.     | 4 February 2012  | S/2012/77   | Regime change in Syria and removing Bashar al-Assad from power                                   | Second veto by Russia and China  |
| 3.     | 19 July 2012     | S/2012/538  | Condemnation of the violation of human rights by the Syrian government                           | Third veto by Russia and China   |
| 4.     | 22 May 2014      | S/2014/348  | Referral of the case of Syria to the International Court of Justice                              | Fourth veto by Russia and China  |
| 5.     | 5 December 2016  | S/2016/1026 | Cessation of hostilities and ceasefire in Syria with the aim of weakening the central government | Fifth veto by Russia and China   |
| 6.     | 28 February 2017 | S/2017/172  | Holding Damascus accountable over the use of chemical weapons                                    | Sixth veto by Russia and China   |

|    |                  |            |                                                               |                                  |
|----|------------------|------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 7. | 12 April 2017    | S/2017/315 | Holding Damascus accountable over the use of chemical weapons | Seventh veto by Russia and China |
| 8. | 16 November 2017 | S/2017/962 | Holding Damascus accountable over the use of chemical weapons | Eighth veto by Russia and China  |

Source: UN Security Council-Veto List.<sup>12</sup>

## OPERATIONAL CHALLENGES

The Syrian conflict has starkly revealed structural and operational flaws at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), exposing a Council increasingly abandoning the fundamental principles of collective security. Four core issues have surfaced, impeding the Council's effectiveness in responding to the crisis and exposing deep divisions among its permanent and non-permanent members.<sup>13</sup>

The first assumption of the collective security theory is that there are relevant international actors who agree about what are the threats to peace and security. The Syrian crisis and the way it has been debated in the Security Council debates has put this assumption to a harsh test. There is a deep seated difference of opinion among Council members as to how to characterise the Syrian conflict. Western Council members including France, UK and USA have characterised the Syrian conflict as the violent suppression of peaceful and democratic aspirations by a ruthless dictator and his security apparatus committing grave violations of human rights or war crimes, or even crimes against humanity. The Syrian government describes itself as a victim of terrorism and foreign interference and plots to destroy the country. The key backers of the Syrian regime, Russia, Iran and China, say the regime is fighting to defend itself against terrorist organisations such as ISIS and the Al-Nusra Front. This key point of disagreement with the West has seen the three major world powers veto a number of draft resolutions at the UN Security Council, either directly condemning the Syrian government or indirectly failing to demand it stand down.

The sharp rift between the two opposing groups at the UN Security Council on the Syrian crisis is exacerbated by the ambiguous positions of regional actors towards the conflict. While Iran and Hezbollah continue to back Syrian President Assad in a difficult and divisive effort, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, backed by Western powers, are supporting the Syrian

opposition. The regional distribution of power is further entangling the already existing geostrategically highly controversial rifts. As a result, sharp geostrategic divides have led to a harsh division of labour at the UN Security Council with little room for compromise. The US has been supporting the Syrian opposition in an effort to contain Iran's expansion in the region, while Russia has been actively supporting the Syrian regime in a bid to further Russia's strategic interests and expand its influence in the Middle East. US and Russian assessments of the situation in Syria are diametrically opposed, which is why the UN Security Council has not adopted a resolution on the Syrian crisis for over a year. The Council is unable to stick to the basic principle of consensus in matters of collective security.

The second assumption of collective security theory suggests that states will work together to solve crises through coordinated action. In contrast, the Syrian conflict is a glaring example of how this does not happen. The Syrian Conflict has developed into a lengthy and complicated crisis primarily because of the tremendous engagement of the many rival international and regional actors. Among the many contributing factors to the internal unrest in Syria are the existence of one-party rule; the presence of ethnic and sectarian discrimination; economic stagnation; rampant corruption; and a long-standing failure to meet the popular demand for political reform.

Externally, the situation has become more complex due to the differing strategic interests of major global and regional players. Supporters of the Assad regime, including Russia, China, Iran, and Hezbollah, have consistently aimed to resolve the conflict while maintaining the current power structure. They resist calls for significant political changes. In contrast, the United States, European Union countries, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar have advocated for regime change to counter Iran's growing influence and challenge Russia's expanding role in the Middle East. While these groups may have different motivations, they share a common goal: removing Bashar al-Assad. This ongoing competition for influence has turned the Syrian conflict into a zero-sum game, where one actor's gain is seen as another's loss. This dynamic makes compromise and a political solution extremely difficult. As a result, the spirit of international cooperation that is vital to the collective security framework has been replaced by strategic competition and geopolitical manoeuvring. Therefore, the second core assumption of collective security has reached a standstill in the context of Syria.

Assumption three of the collective security theory states that the major powers cooperate to address minute-long crises in other locations. With regard to the current crisis in Syria, major

challenges exist when we consider that there are ongoing geopolitical tensions between Russia and China on one side and the West on the other. As a result of this divide, there has been a considerable lack of cooperation and effectiveness amongst all members of the UN Security Council (UNSC) regarding their responses to the Syrian crisis. For example, both Russia and China vetoed the draft of a resolution in 2012 condemning the Syrian government's use of excessive force against demonstrators, citing that the draft was prejudiced against the Syrian government and ignored the use of violence by the anti-government protesters. Similarly, both Russia and China vetoed another resolution in 2014 that would have referred the Syrian crisis to the International Criminal Court for prosecution, as they were concerned about the possibility of interference in Syria's internal issues. The US and UK have attempted to impose economic sanctions on the Assad regime, in addition to calling for accountability from the Syrian government; however, these attempts have been repeatedly blocked by the vetoes of Russia and China and as a result, there is a stalemate within the UNSC and a lack of effective solutions regarding the ongoing Syrian crisis. The growing divisions within international relations reflect a larger trend among the world's major powers, where they apply their own individual national interests and form alliances rather than cooperating with each other to address shared global problems, resulting in a fragmented and often ineffective approach to managing international conflicts. In the case of Syria, these competing geopolitical interests have led to a weakening of the United Nations Security Council's capacity to fulfil its core mission of promoting international peace and security as set forth by the collective security mechanism. This outcome serves to underscore the declining status of collective security in relation to the Syrian crisis.<sup>14</sup>

According to the fourth assumption of collective security theory, states have an interest in collaborating on and implementing a collective response to addressing international crises; however, there are significant contradictions between this type of collaboration and the reality of the Syrian conflict. The Syrian conflict is complicated by numerous conflict groups and competing international and regional interests, which have developed into a nearly impossible web of competing international and regional alliances. Domestically, Syria's various conflict factions have been characterized by a wide variety of different ideologies and beliefs, many of which further divide the factions along ideological lines (ex. secular-democratic vs. Islamist); therefore, a shared framework for negotiations will likely not materialize in this context. Additionally, Russia and China have continued to support the

President Assad regime while the Western powers, e.g. the United States of America, several European nations, etc. have supported multiple opposition groups, which has created a sizable division between these powers in the United Nations Security Council. Overall, the conflicting domestic and international interests regarding the Syrian conflict make it nearly impossible for all involved parties to achieve a common solution.

Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar are all acting regionally as non-state actors, providing assistance to the warring parties around their respective strategic and sectarian goals. Each of these countries has amplified the conflict through their direct support of these factions, leading to increased mistrust between many of the primary participants, which has led to fragmentation and reduced the opportunities for a unified political solution. As a result, all previous attempts at mediation, whether through the UN's Geneva or Astana processes, as well as other forms of diplomacy, have failed repeatedly due to the failure of cooperating among competing interests. For the parallel case of Syria, the ongoing stalemate reflects the failure of the Syrian context's collective security mechanism as well as the inherent structural limitations faced by an international community fractured by competing global powers' desire for influence in their multilateral crisis response.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Security Council, notwithstanding its shortcomings, has contributed significantly towards moderation of the Syrian crisis and realization of its goals regarding maintenance of international peace and security. The contributions have been in terms of: firstly, appointment of a UN Special Envoy, as well as deployment of peacekeepers and provision of assistance for humanitarian missions through cross-border channels. Secondly, the Security Council facilitated delivery of essential items like food and medicine to civilians trapped in conflict zones in Syria. Thirdly, the Council contributed to successful international diplomatic initiatives in form of conferences in Geneva and Vienna to negotiate a solution. Fourthly, the Security Council came up with several statements and communiqués regarding various matters including human rights abuses, terrorism, and plight of refugees. Fifthly, the Security Council has been instrumental in supporting international endeavours to identify, dismantle, and destroy chemical weapons in Syria, which is seen as the Council's most successful move. Sixthly, the Council has always attempted to open lines of dialogue and negotiations as a way

of resolving the crisis. The greatest achievement of the Security Council has been destruction of Syria's chemical weapons stockpiles.

On the other hand, the aforementioned functional achievements contrast sharply with the UNSC's general political paralysis, particularly where consensus is required from major powers. In the case of the Syrian crisis, it is evident that the UNSC's weaknesses lie in the manner in which its processes have been over-politicized, especially when it comes to the use of veto powers. For the Council to continue being relevant and effective, urgent reforms should be made that will include limitations on vetoes that happen when there are humanitarian crises, an increased mandate for dealing with serious human rights abuses, as well as a realignment of its permanent and non-permanent membership to represent the entire world better. Without any reforms at all, it becomes difficult for the Security Council to avoid failing to act on international problems, thus undermining its very reason for existence.

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