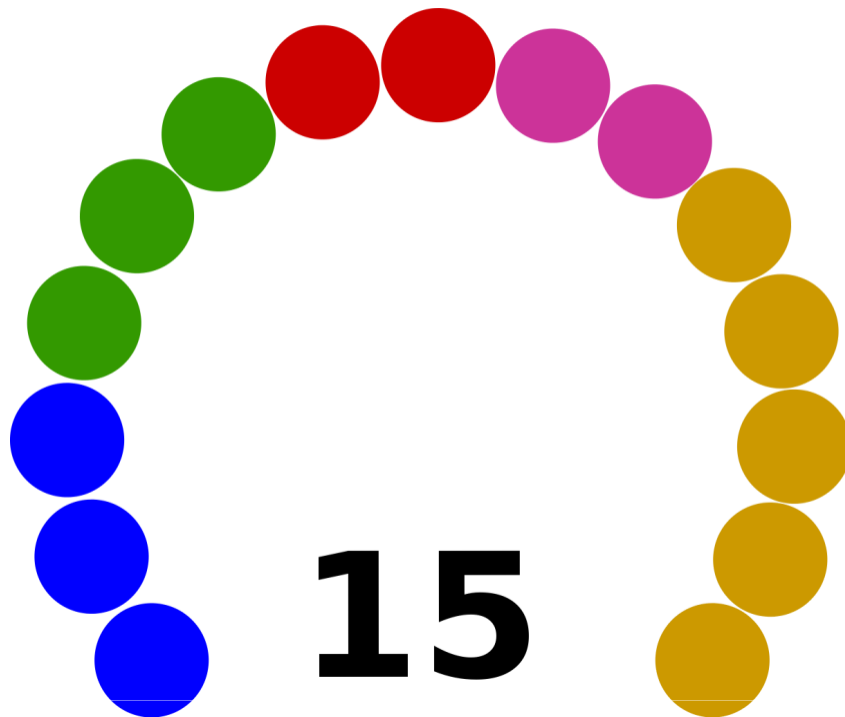


International Organizations

To what extent is the United Nations Security Council effective in addressing wicked problems, such as the civil war in Syria?



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Abstract

This paper offers a critical literature review of why the civil war in Syria can be considered a wicked problem and how the Security Council has proved to be (in) effective in addressing the situation. The paper first investigates what constitutes a wicked problem and later provides an in depth analysis as to whether a civil war, such as the one in Syria can be considered a wicked problem. An examination of previously published literature is made with reference to the ineffectiveness of the Security Council. In order for there to be a balance, both views are examined - one that suggests that the Security Council's veto power needs serious reconsideration and another that the Security Council is an absolute necessity in the 21st century. The paper ends with a conclusion, offering a summary of the main findings as well as providing insight into the limitations of this literature review as well as the practical implications of the findings.

Introduction

The Security Council is one of the primary organs of the United Nations, tasked with maintaining peace, security and harmony in the world. It is the only body which can authorize military intervention in another state and is one of the most highly respected and recognised legislative bodies of the world. However, the very task of “guaranteeing international peace and security” (Bianchi, 2007) can prove to be more than difficult, if not impossible in certain cases. A perfect example of this is the current situation in Syria, which has been unfolding since 2011.

Living in the modern, 21st century, one would think that it is safe to assume that mass atrocities, violations of basic human rights and deaths of civilians in great magnitudes would not be a regular occurrence. Unfortunately, since 2011, such a picture has been emerging from within the Syrian Arab Republic, after anti-government protests turned into a full scale civil war, making the situation of primary international concern.

When such inhumane events occur, it is important to understand why they occur. As will be explained further on in this paper, the Syrian civil war can be dubbed as a “wicked problem” (Head, 2008). Understanding why the situation in Syria is a wicked problem is the first step to understanding why it hasn’t yet been successfully addressed by institutions such as the Security Council. Only upon a firm understanding of what constitutes a wicked problem can one investigate the setup and structure of the Security Council and how it contributes to the (in) effectiveness of addressing such issues.

The role, relevance and effectiveness of the Security Council has been debated for years by scholars, politicians, but also regular citizens. However, these individuals are more divided than ever, with some claiming that the Security Council is an absolute necessity, while others call for ground reform of the institution. In the form of a thorough literature review, this paper aims to address the above-mentioned issues and the research question; “To what extent is the United Nations Security Council effective in addressing wicked problems, such as the situation in Syria?” as well as provide guidance on future possible research on the matter at hand.

The Syrian Civil War: A Wicked Problem?

A wicked problem is a term used by scholars to describe some of the most important and most difficult to solve global challenges. While there is no one, definite definition of a wicked problem, many have attempted to develop theories of what a wicked problem actually is. Perhaps one of the most widely used descriptions, or rather methods of identification of a wicked problem, is that of Brian W. Head. In his 2008 paper, we find that three dimensions of wicked problems have been identified; complexity, uncertainty and value divergence. As Head (2008) argues, “complexity is clearly a constituent feature of wickedness, but complexity itself is not enough to trigger a wicked problem since there are many aspects of complexity that are amenable to scientific analysis and technical/engineering controls” (p.103). This hints to the idea that a wicked problem is one that scores ‘high’ on each of the three dimensions as they are all interconnected in one way or another. If we were to create a venn diagram, a wicked problem would fall in the section where all three dimensions, complexity, uncertainty and value divergence intersect.

Now that the main assumptions of a wicked problem have been identified it is important to turn to the central wicked problem of this paper - the Syrian Civil War. Defining a civil war will greatly aid in assessing to what extent the conflict can be considered a wicked problem and in turn will help evaluate the (in) effectiveness of the United Nations Security Council in addressing the issue.

As Small and Singer (1982) suggest, a civil war can be defined as “any armed conflict that involves (a) military action internal to the metropole, (b) the active participation of the national government, and (c) effective resistance by both sides” (p. 210). As we find in Adams’s (2005) paper, “the (Syrian) government relied upon its security forces to shoot down protestors and systematically detain political opponents” (p.6). As the situation in Syria developed over the years, military involvement increased dramatically, showing clear involvement of troops and the “active participation of the national government” (Small & Singer, 1982). The fact that the conflict, which began in the wake of the Arab spring in 2011 is still going on with increasing

amounts of different groups partaking, is in line with Small and Singer's (1982) argument that an important aspect of a civil war is "resistance by both sides" (p.210). Taking into account the above, brief description of the situation in Syria, we conclude that it can indeed be labeled as a civil war, making the issue ever more complex.

Now that it has been analysed what constitutes a civil war and how the Syrian conflict can be an example of such a civil war, taking Head's (2008) three dimensions, it has to be examined whether this civil war is also a wicked problem. Some may assume, perhaps rightly so, that by definition a civil war is a wicked problem.

Perhaps one of the most important indicators of complexity, is the amount of actors involved in a problem and in the interdependency of thereof.

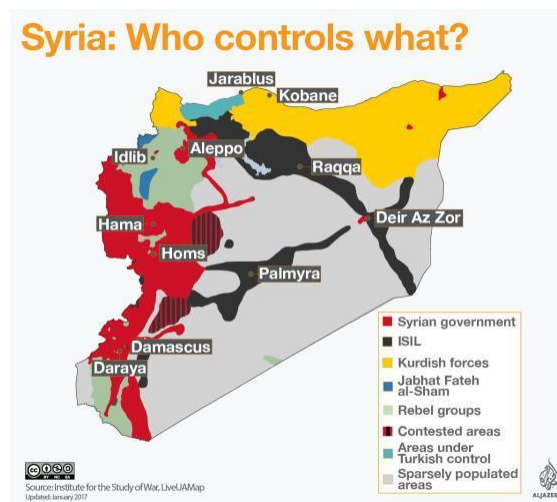


Figure 1: Map showing different actors involved in the Syrian conflict

As can be seen from the above map, several different parties and actors are somewhat stakeholders to the civil war in Syria. What makes the situation all the more interesting and complicated is the fact that the rebel groups are also not consolidated into one, strong allied opposition force but have dispersed and several different groups have emerged - all with different means and goals. Although the majority of the parties' end goal is peace and an end to the civil war. The main problem, however, is that all the different actors involved have very different beliefs about how to achieve that common end goal. Even more importantly, perhaps,

are the different definitions of what or who will guarantee this peace. For instance, President Bashar Al Assad believes that he is the lawful leader of Syria and backed by the likes of Iran or Russia, he believes that only the elimination of the rebels will bring back normality to his country. On the contrary, the opposition groups believe that peace will only be guaranteed once President Assad leaves office and democratic elections will uncover a new President.

When speaking of complexity and the sheer amount of different actors involved in the conflict, the role of external nations must not be forgotten. The fact that the two superpowers, the United States and Russia are on opposing sides, each with their own political interests further complicates the situation and makes reaching a sustainable solution in the Security Council an almost impossible task. One of the reasons for this, as examined later on in this paper, is the veto power possessed by the P5 member states.

When dealing with such a great amount of different players on the table, it becomes clear that any decisions or attempts to solve the conflict pose great uncertainty - another of Head's (2008) dimensions of a wicked problem.

When speaking of uncertainty, Head (2008) primarily focuses on uncertainty "in relation to risks, consequences of actions and changing patterns (p.103). There is great "uncertainty of what a post Assad Syria may look like" (Price, 2013). This is primarily due to the fact that Assad has been the ruler of the country for almost half a century and given the current situation democratic elections seem highly improbable. If Assad was to be removed by force, due to the fact of the many different groups amongst the opposition, another conflict could potentially arise, centered around who would be most suitable to take over. This is also a great example of how complexity and uncertainty are interdependent - the more actors there are the more uncertain the outcome.

Value divergence is another contributing factor to the civil war in Syria. All parties to the conflict have greatly differing fundamental beliefs and values. The United States for instance would urge for democracy, embracement of human rights as well as western values and norms.

President Assad on the other hand believes that the continuation of his authoritarian rule is the best for the country. The so-called Islamic States or ISIS, which has emerged as a great threat to not only Syria but the whole world, would like to instate Sharia law and deeply rooted extreme Islamic views. Realising that each of the aforementioned parties plays a huge role in the conflict, such a difference in opinions and fundamental beliefs makes the conflict even harder to resolve. This echoes the argument that was made earlier - even though the end goal is some sort of peace, each of the stakeholders has a differing view on how this peace should look like and how it should be achieved.

Given the analysis above, we can see that the three dimensions of wicked problems proposed by Head (2008), greatly overlap in the case of Syria. A wicked problem is one that “features innumerable causes, are tough to adequately describe and by definition have no right answers” (Price, 2013). This, given the arguments made earlier, is exactly what the situation in Syria is like and perhaps one of the many contributing factors to the death toll which now exceeds 400,000 (Hudson, 2016). The Syrian civil war is perhaps one of the most complicated and crucial wicked problems that we are faced with today. In line with the current findings of this paper and many other scholars, Clinton (2014) suggests that as the situation has progressed and as no sustainable solution has been found “Syria has become even more of a wicked problem” (p.395) and “the Syrian civil war satisfies all of the criteria of a wicked problem” (Price, 2013).

The structure of the Security Council

The Security Council is one of the primary organs of the United Nations. It is the only body which can authorize military intervention in another state. It is one of the most highly respected and recognised legislative bodies of the world. This UN Organ is made up of fifteen member states, five of which are permanent (the P5). The ten non permanent members rotate every two years in the form of elections through the UN’s General Assembly. What is important to highlight is that the five permanent members of the council, namely the United Kingdom, United States, France, China and Russia have veto power, meaning that they can overrule any resolution of the council. For instance if there are thirteen votes in favour of a resolution and two against,

but one of those comes from one of the 'P5 Nations, the resolution automatically fails. This is one of the biggest criticisms of the council in the sense that not only does it hinder successful implementations of solutions that the majority agrees to, but also, as argued by some, puts a strain on democracy since the will of the majority is not heard.

The structure of the Security Council and the Syrian wicked problem

The conflict in Syria has now been unfolding for almost six years. Not only is there no clear solution at sight but with every day, more and more blood is shed and lives are lost. People's lives have been destroyed, millions have been forced to flee their homes and hundreds of thousands have died, many being children. It becomes clear that the international community, putting its private agenda, has failed the Syrian people. The Security Council is one of the international bodies that has not done everything in its power in order to put an end to this humanitarian crisis. "Since the internal conflict began in Syria, and despite reports on continued violence, aggression, killings, and humanitarian crises, the United Nations Security Council has been unable to implement multiple proposed resolutions to maintain international peace and security" (Khallaf, 2016).

What must be realised is that it is not necessarily that there is a lack of will amongst Security Council members to solve the crisis. The problem lies elsewhere – in the structure and format of the Security Council and the way resolutions are passed and decisions made. The veto power of the permanent members is said to be one of the fundamental reasons for the lack of effective solutions to challenges such as the Syrian civil war. As Khallaf (2016), suggests, "the consensus among scholars is that the Russian and Chinese veto is the main political obstacle that is restricting the Security Council from intervening and stopping the civil war in Syria" (p. 20). The fact that Russia and China are both permanent members who have long standing close relations and are considered to be allies also does not aid the situation. Between 2011 and 2015, the two superpowers have exercised their veto power four times each on resolutions concerning the Syrian civil war. What is most disturbing is that these resolutions sought to put an end to the conflict. "These resolutions were concerned with condemning violent attacks on protesters,

outbreak of war in the country, sanctions if violence continues or Syria's (Assad's) referral to ICC 57 Security Council" (Khallaf, 2016). From these examples, we can see how even though the other members of the council voted in favour of such resolutions and a majority was reached, because of two vetoes, the resolution was automatically rejected.

The large ideological divisions between the permanent members, coupled with the fact that all of these differing members have the veto power and can use it in order to block on another's solution or suggestion to fit their own political interests is where the Security Council arrives at a deadlock. "The UN security council is failing Syria because of big power divisions which have prevented action to end a conflict" (McGreal, 2015).

The veto power is not the only problem within the Security Council. As Hurd (2002) argues, "the Charter of the United Nations gives the Security Council enormous formal powers, but it does not give it direct control of the tools with which to enact those powers" (p.35). The issue here is that even if a resolution passes, the successful implementation of the suggested solutions is contingent on the state the resolution concerns. If Assad doesn't recognise the Security Council's legitimacy or will not voluntarily adhere to the recommendations, then even if the United States and Russia were to overcome their differences and not exercise their veto power, a solution would be worthless unless the Syrian government is threatened with military intervention in line with the Security Council's 'responsibility to protect'. We hence arrive at a paradox – it seems that even though organs such as the Security Council have been created in order to prevent violence, the only possible solution is the use of military force in a situation where lives are already being lost. Clearly, that 'possible solution' is not an alternative and should not be enacted leaving the council with no options and bringing the member states back to where they left off from, in search for a solution.

On the other hand, the Security Council can be thought of as a necessity in terms of international governance and multilateral cooperation. What is important to realise is that general world peace and stability have been maintained since the end of World War 2 - no major, wide scale international military conflict, comparable to the horrors of the second world war has taken place

since 1945. Perhaps one explanation for this is the Security Council's (criticised) format and structure itself - "the legal structure of the UN Security Council has been a crucial mechanism for this enormous achievement so important to the entire human race" (Sieff, 2013). One of the reasons for this is the fact that the United Nations and Security Council alike are a highly regarded and respected platform for dialogue and discussion. Through providing the opportunity for heads of state to discuss crises rather than resort to the use of force, the United Nations has become the most important international arena where debate takes place. As controversial as it may seem, some also argue that the very criticized veto power in the Security Council contributes to the above described scenario of peace.

Perhaps the veto power is actually a great advantage and could be considered as "the fundamental reason world peace has been maintained has been the veto power of the five main global nations – the United States, the Soviet Union/Russia, China, Britain and France – in the UN Security Council. This is the fundamental brake, or safeguard, against the irresponsible and reckless use of unilateral armed force by any single great power" (Sieff, 2013).

Furthermore, in support of the Security Council, it has to be noted that several resolutions (as debatable their efficiency may be) have indeed been passed and implemented. A good example of this is resolution 2165, adopted unanimously in 2014. Although this resolution does not directly solve the armed conflict on Syrian territory, it does supply the Syrian population with much needed medical, sanitary and other similar relief deliveries. What is important to note is that the resolution, in line with the principle of state sovereignty guarantees these deliveries with the consent of the Syrian government. As mentioned before, while this resolution does not end the armed conflict, it does indeed bring hope for the future. As the Russian Federation ambassador states, the resolution puts the interests of civilians first without inflicting any more violence. "There is no trigger in the text for the use of force in the event of noncompliance and the text reflects his country's (Russia's) concerns for the respect of Syrian sovereignty, as well as recognizes Syrian efforts to cooperate with humanitarian aid delivery." (United Nations, 2014).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has offered insight into why the Syrian civil war is a wicked problem and as a result, why it has still not been successfully resolved. As has been examined, the Syrian civil war is of great complexity due to the great number of different actors and stakeholders involved; all of whom have completely different ideas and means about how to end the conflict. One of the reasons for this, is value divergence - another key dimension of wicked problems as per Head's (2008) analysis.

In theory, the Security Council seems as the perfect organ to address such problems - an organ where nations come together to debate the fate of the world and carve a path for diplomatic solutions. However, this paper found that the Security Council has, to a greater extent, been thus far ineffective in addressing the Syrian civil war. Since the conflict began, the death toll has increased dramatically while the Security Council member states have failed to overcome their political differences for the benefit of the Syrian people. The veto power is one of the main obstructions, preventing the council from reaching a resolution that would put an end to the bloodshed and violence.

While the paper offered an extensive review of available literature on wicked problems and the Syrian civil war, an interview with an expert on the matter would have even further aided the analysis. It would be important, however, to interview an expert that is impartial to both the conflict and the Security Council - it is important that it would be either a UN or member state official in order to ensure an unbiased and critical approach.

These findings have of course great practical implications. If the Security Council format and organization will not be reformed, if serious debate about the reorganization of the council will not be held, then the council might begin to lose its legitimacy as it will be seen as merely a bureaucratic platform where there is much discussion but little solution. Therefore, it is suggested that further extensive investigation into possible reform of the council is conducted. Only after thorough research and consideration of all consequences can there be talk of reform.

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