

US Missiles and Parallels of Interventionism in Syria's 'Thirty Years War'

Written by Francis Grice

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FRANCIS GRICE, APR 14 2017

Although never articulated in such stark terms, one of the core goals of the Treaties of Westphalia – which were signed to conclude the Thirty Years War in 1648 – was the idea of “never again.” The terms of the treaties sought, ultimately, to ensure that the world could be forever free from the involvement of outside forces into domestic conflicts that had made the Thirty Years War so long-lived and catastrophic. Yet, as numerous foreign interventions into the current Syrian Civil War have demonstrated, including most recently the cruise missile strikes by the United States on April 6, 2017, this vision is becoming increasingly undone. While the world has been right to dilute the power of sovereignty since 1945, the presence and impact of repeated foreign interventions into Syria reminds us of why sovereignty was conceived to start with and why we must quickly find a replacement for it.

The Thirty Years War

The Thirty Years war was one of the bloodiest and most destructive wars in history, with an estimated 7.5 million people dying from battle and disease, as well as government atrocities. Despite beginning as a predominantly internal affair regarding the politics and religion of the German provinces in the Holy Roman Empire, the crisis escalated into a pan-European war that was dominated by the interventions of foreign powers. These intrusions happened mostly in response to the rising and waning of the fortunes of the various sides: when the Protestants appeared to be on the brink of victory, they would be opposed by outside Catholic states, while when the Catholics prospered, they would be rebuffed by external Protestant powers. As a result, the conflict dragged on in a seemingly never-ending cycle of violence. The image of myriad foreign armies marching to and fro across German soil, leaving death and carnage in their wake, came to epitomize the conflict.

The core principle that emerged from the Treaties of Westphalia at the end of the war was the decree that the prince of each state should decide which variant of Christianity their domain would follow. In time, this evolved into modern state sovereignty as we know it today, with its creed that the domestic affairs of a state fall exclusively under the jurisdiction of the government of that state. But the underlying rationale behind the creation of this principle is often glossed over. The Treaties of Westphalia were driven by a determination that the horrible saga that Germany had experienced should never again be allowed to occur. From this point on, the military involvement of one state into the affairs of another would be viewed as unacceptable, at least partially in order to prevent foreign powers from extending civil wars through repeated interventions on behalf of the losing side.

Syrian Similarities

Parallels between the foreign interventions in the Thirty Years War and their presence in Syria are reasonably clear cut. The full roster of outside incursions is too lengthy to cover here, but a few examples can be provided. Throughout the early years of the conflict, when the rebels were still struggling to find their feet, their efforts were assisted by the supply of large quantities of weapons and other aid from Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and a number of other Arab states. This arrangement was formalized in 2013, when the Arab League officially endorsed the provision of arms and funding to support the rebel groups. The United States and other Western states also supplied limited amounts of arms and non-lethal aid. These efforts were offset in part by limited support for the Assad Regime by Iran, Russia,

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and Hezbollah, but the rebels were nevertheless bolstered sufficiently that they could first stabilize their positions and later push back hard against the government. By late 2015, the situation had reversed and the military prospects looked so bleak for the Syrian government that many experts predicted its imminent demise. At this stage, Russia interceded more forcefully to support the Assad regime through the insertion of military advisors, deployment of airstrikes, and amplification of arms and aid. This enabled the government to gradually regain the upper hand. Now, with the Syrian government drawing towards a point where victory seems nearly within its grasp, the United States has intervened by firing 59 Tomahawk missiles and threatening further actions in the near future. This promises to tilt the balance of power back to the middle once more and plunge the war back into a state of indecision and flux. Numerous externally backed domestic groups will continue to thrust aggressively against one another, causing yet further human suffering, but without the prospect of victory for any one side. These interventions and their impact mirror the same basic pattern that led the civil war in Germany to span thirty long and painful years.

It is not only the activities of the external powers in Syria that share parallels with the Thirty Years War, but also the motivations behind their actions. In the Thirty Years War, external powers did not intervene purely because they wanted to defend the political and religious rights of certain factions, but also because the civil war offered an arena away from their homelands in which they could demonstrate their power on an international stage, advance their own strategic agendas, and check the ambitions of their rivals. The Swedish King, Gustavus Adolphus, for example, decided to plunge into the conflict in part because he feared that his foreign rivals would acquire too much power should the Catholic faction in Germany be victorious.

The resemblance to Syria is notable. Saudi Arabia, for example, undoubtedly possesses genuine revulsion against the oppression wrought by the Syrian government against its own people. Yet, it is also motivated to support the rebels by the strategic realization that the overthrow of the Assad regime would likely shift the regional balance of the power towards them and away from Iran. Similarly, in 2015, Russia intervened in part to remind the world of its great power status, buoy up one of its few remaining allies, and exert greater influence in the region. Most recently, despite its formal claims to have attacked the Syrian government as punishment for its illegal and inhuman use of chemical weapons, the Trump administration appears to have joined the war for multiple other reasons as well. These include a desire to communicate its rivalry with Russia to their domestic population, demonstrate a willingness to use military force as a sanction against states who commit human rights atrocities and employ weapons of mass destruction (a not too subtle threat against North Korea), and signpost that the United States is rejuvenating its position as a global force to be reckoned with under its new president. Similarly to the situation in Germany, Syria has provided a distant sandbox for these and other foreign states to strive to advance their individual agendas, undermine those of their competitors, communicate their strength and resolve to other states, and deliver messages to domestic audiences.

New Answer Needed

Through their creation of an early version of sovereignty, the drafters of the Westphalian Peace aspired to create a safer world, in which the kind of tragedy created by the Thirty Years War could be forever averted. Had no foreign powers been allowed to intervene in the German civil war, the logic probably ran, then the struggle would have remained predominantly local and resulted in significantly less death and devastation.

Yet, subsequent centuries have demonstrated quite how flawed this solution was. The norm of non-interference enabled and even encouraged the world to stand idly by while hundreds of millions of people were killed by the Communist regimes of Stalin, Mao, and other Marxist dictators; to turn a blind eye to the horrifying genocide and extermination campaigns of the Nazi and Japanese governments in the 1930s, until they forced a response by invading other countries; and to look away while genocide was carried out in Rwanda. These and far too many other cases have demonstrated the unacceptable shortcomings of the Westphalian system and its emphasis upon non-interference. We simply cannot and should not live in a world where domestic tyrants can commit atrocities against their people at will and without consequence.

The global response to the flaws of the Westphalian system has been to dilute the robustness of sovereignty and begin courting interventionism once more. Various international treaties have, for example, directed that states can intercede in the affairs of others when domestic crimes of a sufficient magnitude or type have been committed.

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Following the failures of UN peacekeeping in the 1990s, the UN loosened the protections provided for states through sovereignty with the creation of "Responsibility to Protect" – a doctrine that places both a right and a responsibility upon states to intervene in the affairs of other states when certain crimes are committed. It also created an International Criminal Court, which can try suspected human rights violators when their home state is unable or unwilling to do so. Given the horrifying atrocities that have been committed under the cover of sovereignty and its protections, this peeling back of its inviolability makes considerable sense. States may no longer stand idly by while genocide and other crimes against humanity are committed beyond their own borders. They are instead both empowered and required to act in these instances, which is certainly a good thing.

Yet, when we look at Syria today, it is hard not to see the same core mechanics at work that led the Thirty Years War to be so lengthy and so damaging. Simply put, the outside intervention of foreign powers is prolonging and intensifying the war in Syria, just as outside forces did in Germany nearly four centuries ago. The attempted solution to this problem that was reached at Westphalia led to even greater suffering by allowing dictators to abuse their subjects and it is right that sovereignty should no longer be held as sacrosanct. Yet, that does not change the existence of the original problem that led to its creation in 1648. By reembracing the norm of interventionism, the world's major powers are rediscovering the very reason why it was banished at Westphalia so many years ago. Sovereignty is not the right answer to the problem, but nor is interventionism. We need urgently to come up with something better, or else the Syrian people may yet face 23 more years of war and misery.

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Francis Grice is an Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Studies at McDaniel College in Maryland, where he has worked since 2014. Prior to this posting, he worked as a Teaching Fellow at King's College London. He has a PhD in Defence Studies from King's College London (2014). His thesis critically examined the originality and transnational influence of the teachings of Mao Zedong on insurgent warfare.