



Cynicism, realism, and Syria

By: Justin Logan, *Director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute* – June 14, 2013

Dan Drezner has reiterated his provocative argument that President Barack Obama's Syria policy is cynical and attributable to realism. For Dan, arming the rebels is simply the next iteration of the unspoken, brutally *realpolitik* policy towards Syria that's been going on for the past two years. To recap, the goal of that policy is to ensnare Iran and Hezbollah into a protracted, resource-draining civil war, with as minimal costs as possible. This is exactly what the last two years have accomplished.... at an appalling toll in lives lost....

For the low, low price of aiding and arming the rebels, the U.S. preoccupies all of its adversaries in the Middle East.

I think this is wrong and does realism a disservice.

There is a case to be made that if realists endorsed the broader U.S. strategy in the Middle East, a realist thing to do would be to engage in a variant of a "bait and bleed" proxy war without regard for the human cost in order to cause headaches for Iran and Hezbollah. Except I don't know any realists who endorse the broader U.S. strategy in the Middle East, which ought to pose a problem for Drezner's argument.

There's a Vietnam analogy here. As John Mearsheimer has pointed out a thousand times, essentially all realists except Henry Kissinger opposed the Vietnam War, and essentially all realists except Kissinger opposed the Iraq war. Why? Not because they were peacenik hippies, but rather because they disagreed with the theory on which the war was based: in Vietnam, the domino theory; and in Iraq, both the Saddam-can't-be-deterred theory and especially the democratic domino theory. As ever, there is an enormous difference between Beltway realism and actual realism. The Beltway foreign-policy community might deploy realist tactics, but it does not listen to realists on strategy.

As John Schuessler and Sebastian Rosato have argued, at the strategic level, realists wouldn't have us pay terribly much attention to who rules Syria, or Hezbollah, or even Iran. In their view, realism would advise the US to balance against other great powers and to take a relaxed attitude toward minor powers. The exception would be when a minor power is situated in a strategically important region of the world, in which case it would prescribe vigilant containment. These injunctions are similar to those that fall under the rubric of "offshore balancing," a grand strategy favored by many realists.

They include Iran as being situated in a strategically important region of the world and advise containing Tehran should it acquire a nuclear weapon. So I don't think it's right to read realists as advising Washington to fuel the Syrian civil war in the hopes of bleeding Hezbollah and Iran white.

It's this sort of operationally realist but strategically grandiose foreign policy that has given realism a bad name. Sometimes, in the name of conservatism and defraying the costs of war, realists advise deeply cynical policies that force those costs onto others. But in a similar spirit of conservatism, and indeed ethics, they tend to define the national interest in such a way that a profoundly secure country like the United States doesn't have to do terrible things across the globe all the time. But for some reason, realism winds up taking the blame for the humanitarian cost, rather than the ambitious, non-realist strategy.

At any rate, if realism counsels the approach Dan identifies, one would expect realists to have been advocating it. I haven't heard any. Have you?

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