International Society in Theory and Practice

International Society in Theory and Practice: Humanitarian Intervention and the Global Response to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant

The current humanitarian intervention taking place in Iraq and Syria against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (hereafter referred to as ISIL) is demonstrative of a baseline, cosmopolitan understanding of human rights and norms within the international community. Every time a new conflict arises and a singular state or a coalition of states intervenes, we always return to realist arguments. States, in other words, "will not intervene for primarily humanitarian reasons because they are always motivated by considerations of rational self-interest" (Wheeler 2000: 30). This is, as will be discussed in the body of this essay, an over-simplification, which does not take into account global norms and understandings of the human condition. The purpose of this piece, then, is to refute this realist claim and to show that the states taking action both militarily and assisting with humanitarian aid points to the existence of an international society of the solidarist variety. The evidence supporting the contrary assumption that realism makes a flawed argument stems from the surprising diversity of partners that have joined this operation and their belief in an inherent understanding of human wellbeing as well as the importance of state sovereignty. Furthermore, this particular case study examining the global reaction to ISIL brings up questions surrounding the legitimacy of humanitarian interventions, compared to purely actions of rational self-interest in global politics. This piece will focus on the English school from a solidarist perspective and its ideas about international society as well as the application of this theory to the case at hand and humanitarian interventions as a whole. Furthermore, it will be important to look into whether or not it actually matters if states are acting in their own self-interest as long as their actions and show they acknowledge this society of states. It might be prudent to note that there is no assertion that the English school is a perfect theory and, therefore, it will be of tremendous value to look at some of the flaws within the assertions of the English school as well. Despite any perceived shortcomings within the theory, the important question remains: Within the current intervention against ISIL throughout Iraq and Syria, do we see an international society upholding human rights norms and preventing a total breakdown of the state system? Or are the Great Powers and other state actors only perpetuating the realist assumptions of calculated self-interest to maximize their own security and benefit.

International Relations Theory and global politics tend to reproduce the realist point of view when describing global phenomena. Realism continues to be the dominant theory in International Relations, but often times realism can bee seen as too narrow, self-fulfilling and simplistic. The English school of International Relations, a normative theory, offers a "synthesis of different theories and concepts. In so doing, it avoids the either/or framing of realism vs. idealism" (Dunne 2013: 133). Furthermore, the framing or description of the international system plays a large role in defining this theory. International society as defined by Headley Bull in his 1977 book *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics,* is when a group of states interacts with one another and are bound by a set of rules and norms (Bull in Dunne et al. 2013: 139). So, if we can assume that states, as the primary actors in global politics, are operating within a society (despite anarchy), then it is not a stretch to make the claim that there is a collective responsibility to protect the aforementioned values and norms. This is particularly true when human rights issues are examined (Dunne 2013: 142). However, it is important to note that the English school does have a serious rift when examining this idea of an international society. There are two different schools of thought that make up this rift, which is especially evident when it comes to humanitarian intervention (the "enforcement" of these rules and norms, mostly militarily). These two camps are pluralism and solidarism. A pluralist international society focuses on the liberty of

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states to protect the rights and lives of their own citizens. Humanitarian intervention, therefore, can upset the balance of international order because each sovereign state could have a different interpretation of what constitutes justice and values (Wheeler 2000: 29). Furthermore, pluralists argue that "individual acts of intervention are illegitimate because they breach the fundamental rule of international society: the principle of non-intervention (Bellamy 2003). On the other hand, the argument this essay seeks to put forth is one of solidarism. The solidarist international society argues for a set of *universal* norms and values that need to be enforced by the international community. The solidarist argument for humanitarian intervention is best outlined in Nicholas J. Wheeler's book *Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society (2000).* He argues that there are some conditions that need to be met for an intervention of this sort to be legitimate. Of the four criteria Wheeler outlines, the first might be the most important when looking at the current intervention against ISIL in Iraq and Syria. Wheeler, in discussing legitimate interventions on humanitarian grounds, states: "A supreme humanitarian emergency exists when the only hope of saving lives depends on outsiders coming to the rescue." This point can be debated, but if a state wins international public opinion (via the United Nations Security Council, etc.) it is therefore seen as a legitimate use of force (Wheeler 2000: 34). Unfortunately, because many governments disagree about the necessity of an intervention if it is pre-emptive, many interventions only take place after the atrocities have been committed. Those who subscribe to the notion of a pluralist international society are not alone with their criticisms of humanitarian intervention. There is a lot of debate about the legitimacy of such interventions because there is an assumption within International Relations theory about state opportunism (Goodman 2006: 109). This idea about opportunism arrives from the inherent distrust amongst states as put forth by the realist school of International Relations. If the argument is made about opportunism, however, the failure of a state and the breakdown of the state system is also seen by Wheeler as a valid reason for intervention.

The case study being examined has to do with the international community's intervention against ISIL in Iraq and Syria. At the beginning, the international community dragged its feet until ISIL has taken control of numerous swaths of territory, effectively erasing much of the border between Syria and Iraq. The threat of the breakdown of these two states, coupled with the human rights violations perpetrated by ISIL made it imperative that the international community act. Arguably, the two events that can be looked at as the final straws leading up to this humanitarian intervention were the imminent extermination of the Yazidi people and the Kurdish Peshmerga losing ground in the north of Iraq. In regards to the humanitarian disaster unfolding with the Yazidi people, and according to a UN OCHA flash update from 4 August 2014, "some 35-50,000 people" were driven from their homes and were "reportedly surrounded" by ISIL on the Sinjir Mountain. Following the ISIL persecution of the Yazidi people, aid was dropped and on 13 August 2014, American troops landed to "assess options for a potential rescue of Yazidi citizens threatened by Islamic extremists" (Chulov et al. 2014). This particular action, though relatively small, is an example of states intervening when the massacre of civilians was imminent if they did nothing. Furthermore, according to the *Report on the Protection of Civilians in the Armed Conflict in Iraq: 6 July to 10 September 2014* by the United Nations, "many of the violations and abuses perpetrated by ISIL and associated armed groups may amount to war crimes or crimes against humanity." Therefore, it can be argued with relative ease with which the current situation in Iraq and Syria meets the solidarist criteria for humanitarian intervention. In fact, it seems as though the entire premise of universal human rights could not exist in Iraq or Syria if ISIL is allowed to operate freely.

The jihadists that make up ISIL are predominantly Sunnis whose aim is to "sow civil unrest in Iraq and the Levant with the aim of establishing a caliphate – a single, transnational Islamic state based on sharia" (Laub and Masters 2014). This civil unrest, as mentioned above, has created numerous humanitarian issues such as ethnic cleansing, mass executions and refugee surges. The UN's High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that, since ISIL has taken Mosul in Northern Iraq in June 2014, more than 65,000 refugees have fled into Turkey. Nearly 11,000 have fled into Jordan. In all, more than 1.6 million people have been displaced by this conflict (Bacchi 2014). This number is staggering in any conflict, and the humanitarian crisis in this particular case threatens regional stability, affecting all of the neighboring countries and beyond. Any time there are human rights catastrophes and exorbitant amounts of money needing to be spent on sheltering refugees, etc. there will be the threat of destabilization. The whole region understands that this brand of jihad is bad for business and there needed to be a response to ISIL and a rescuing of innocent civilians caught in the turmoil. As mentioned above, Nicholas J. Wheeler points out in his criteria for humanitarian intervention, the breakdown, or threat thereof, of a nation-state is a viable reason to act. It has become apparent that the state system in the region has been threatened and the British Foreign Minister, Philip

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Hammond concurs, going so far as to say that this current conflict would be Iraq's last chance at being a self-sufficient nation-state (Williams 2014). The erasing of the Sykes-Picot border and erosion of stable government in favor of a sharia-based caliphate is in itself a crisis and as ISIL has progressed, states with vastly different ideas on human rights began to work together on fixing this problem completely in line with Wheeler's criteria. Each state that has joined the fight or contributed in one way or another knows that upholding international norms and values is in their self-interest. It is not simply a "happy coincidence where the promotion of national security also defends human rights" (Wheeler 2000: 30). This shared interest amongst the parties involved in fighting ISIL has many complex dimensions, but human rights disasters are universally bad for security and go against 21st century norms.

The most compelling case for the solidarist international society argument vis-à-vis the 2014 military and humanitarian intervention in Iraq and Syria stems from the plurality of nations involved. As of September 2011, ten Arab states agreed to join a US-led coalition to fight against ISIL and its allies (Bacchi 2014). Iran, long seen as a foe of the United States, has also sent troops to defend Baghdad against the advancement of ISIL forces (Chulov 2014). The diversity of this group is the most important part of this English School argument. Saudi Arabia, one of the leading partners in this coalition, is well known for domestic human rights abuses and gender equality issues, but these pale in comparison to the actions of ISIL. The idea that ten Arab states, along with the Western powers, can come to an agreement on a basic understanding of human rights and the protection of the nation-state is progress of a kind. Secretary General of the Arab League Nabil Elaraby, in a September interview stated that ISIL "contravene all principles of human behavior" and that the creation of this Islamic state was "not acceptable at all" (Abu-Husain 2014). This recognition on the part of the Arab League signifies a solidarist viewpoint, even if it is only rhetoric.

It's easy to see, on the other hand, where a realist would make an argument about security and dismiss the talk of norms, values and humanitarian obligations. To use the United States as an example, Washington could be acting purely out of self-interest by trying to remedy a poor image in the region and coming to the aid of a besieged ally (the Iraqi government). The Saudis, for example could also be interested in enhancing their own power or influence in the Middle East by taking advantage of a destabilized Iraq and Syria. However, as Martha Finnermore points out, there are shortcomings in the realist's argument. A lot of which surround its oversimplification of global phenomena. In addressing these shortcomings, she says:

"Realist and liberal theories do not provide good explanations for this behavior [humanitarian interventions]. The interests that these theories impute to states are geostrategic and/or economic, yet many or most of these interventions occur in states of negligible geostrategic or economic importance to the interveners."

Therefore, an argument worth making is that "diverse communities can and do reach agreement about substantive moral standards and that international society has moral agency to uphold those standards" (Bellamy 2003). This is the solidarist view in a nutshell. If the United States, the European Union, Iran and ten Arab states can all agree about the need to act against a threatening group like ISIL, shared norms and values must exist. Even on a basic level, there is an understanding within a diverse group of states what constitutes right and wrong.

The last argument that needs to be made is simple: does it really matter if these states are only acting in self-interest or if they are all talk and no walk? The simple answer is "no". The evidence for an international society with this current operation against ISIL goes beyond the military strikes being conducted. Disappointingly, while Washington boasts of a vast coalition (62 nations, thus far) "only 16 have actually committed military forces, and only 11 have conducted offensive operations to date. Many appear willing to pay lip service to U.S. President Barack Obama's condemnation of ISIS, only to ignore his subsequent call to arms" (Cohen and Scheinmann 2014). Despite the lip service and condemnation of what's happening in Iraq and the Levant with little action, the mere fact that these states are *saying* something is the important thing here. Fernando Tesón makes the most poignant argument when it comes to this idea about a state's real motives. States do act in their own self-interest by intervening on behalf of suffering individuals and claiming the right to protect, but that's not important. The important thing is to test "whether the intervention has put an end to human rights deprivations. That is sufficient to meet the requirement…even if there are other, non-humanitarian reasons behind the intervention" (Tesón 1988 in Wheeler 2000: 38). The critics of the English school in this case don't take into account the "possibility that justification might correspond with motivation, and that state leaders might recognize a moral responsibility to defend human rights" (Wheeler 2000: 39). That,

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however, does not apply to states that merely claim they are acting in the interest of an affected group of people, only to serve their own ulterior motives. Stephen Walt's critique of the current policy in the Middle East falls into the realist trap when he says that the United Stats' "talk about noble ideas like freedom and democracy simply provided justification for self-interested actions" (Walt 2014). This is precisely the realist argument against humanitarian intervention in Iraq and Syria. They simply cannot entertain the idea that a nation would act outside its own interests to help citizens of a foreign country. The evidence provided for the contrary should be compelling enough to doubt realism's black and white assertions. Similar to constructivism, the English school takes into account personal experience, and the human element of situations as well as both being normative theories. If states are the only things that matter as actors and in decision-making, a lot is lost in terms of understanding. The constructivist school of thought and the English school have a few overlaps when justifying humanitarian interventions as well. This is especially true in the case of norms, values and the universaly of said values. A constructivist would concur that, in this scenario, there is a call to act due to the tragic situation ISIL has put the Middle East in. The "constructed", self-evident notion of human rights, wellbeing and the integrity of the state give us a more nuanced understanding of international politics and justification for upholding those norms.

In conclusion, all the evidence brought forth for an international society that has intervened on behalf of the Iraqi and Syrian people does not make this theory perfect. The difficulty the English school has is to explain why states, when presented with similar disasters, *do not* act. There has been, for example, an ongoing civil war in Syria since 2011 that has been mostly untouched even though the Assad regime has reportedly used chemical weapons against his own people and the West is still worried the Syrian government may have more stockpiles (Stout 2014). Humanitarian interventions, as argued throughout this essay, rely on an international society and that society doesn't always make its case for intervention objectively. It's not permanent and certainly not perfect. The interaction between states when making decisions of such magnitude are bound to provide puzzling moments of inaction. That, however, does not allow for the English school and the solidarist international society to be dismissed. Furthermore, it almost seems as if an international society can operate simultaneously with realist self-interest considering the aforementioned arguments put forth by Tesón. Realism and the English school are not, therefore, mutually exclusive. What the English school has shown us in the case of ISIL, however, is that the international community could be *trending* toward a society, but might not yet be there fully. When criticizing this theory for its inability to explain selectivity and seemingly no literature on the topic, what seems to appear is a hierarchy of values when states choose to engage. Returning to Wheeler's criteria, the international coalition seems to have placed a higher value on the threat of the state system dissolving in the Middle East over Assad's regime killing its own people. Meaning, upholding the state system is of utmost importance for those contemplating action or intervention on behalf of a beleaguered people/group. The historical precedent for this seems to be consistent with inaction in Rwanda (the state ceasing to exist arguably wasn't at stake there) or action in Somalia and the former Yugoslavia, where the state was breaking up and failing on top of human rights disasters. The English school variables when explaining humanitarian intervention, therefore, seem to be unequal in the eyes of the international community. Though this may be the case and the theory has its flaws, it does a good job in explaining the current operation being undertaken against ISIL in Iraq and Syria.

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