Assessing Syria's Chemical Weapons Ambiguity

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Since the 1970s, the Syrian Arab Republic (Syria) had a chemical weapons programme: With an estimated 1,000 tons of chemical gases, Syria was thought to possess the third biggest chemical weapons stockpile worldwide (CRS, 2013, 5) which it made use of frequently throughout the first years of its civil war (Ibid, 12). However, on 14/9/2013, Syria, acceded to the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on their Destruction (CWC) despite having repeatedly demonstrated a lack of concern for international weapons treaties up until then. So what changed? The chemical weapons attack conducted by the Syrian government on 21/8/2013 against its own citizens, which was met with a threat of military action, is widely accepted as the turning point. Norm theorists would argue that the unprecedented backlash to this attack from foreign governments, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and International Organisations (IOs) explains Syria's accession to the CWC. However, can the imminent military threat of the US be ignored as a factor in Syria's accession? Realists argue that, with state survival being a state's highest priority, commitment to the CWC was based on immediate state interest, protecting Syria against an imminent US military strike. This disagreement touches on the roots of a wider IR debate between Realists and Institutionalists regarding compliance and coercion.

After giving a brief historical introduction ranging from the establishment of the Syrian chemical weapons program to their accession to the CWC in 2013, this essay will contribute to this debate in outlining both the norm-based and realist approach and apply them to this case. After reviewing and comparing evidence, this essay will ultimately argue that a neoclassical realist approach can best explain Syria's case.

Despite plenty of evidence for the existence of Syria's longstanding chemical weapons programme, its existence was continuously denied by the Syrian government. Defying long-standing calls to give up its chemical weapons stockpile, Syria did not commit to eliminating its chemical weapons until 2013. The most notable warning against using chemical weapons came in 2012 with Obama's famous "red line" speech, in which he committed to military action in case of chemical weapon usage (CNN, 2012). Nevertheless, on the 21/8/2013, the Syrian government conducted a chemical weapons attack on the district of Ghouta, killing 1,400 civilians (HRW, 2013). This attack was met with universal condemnation by actors such as foreign governments, transnational actors and the Syrian population and represented a breach of the "red line" Obama had imposed a year earlier. Reactions to the attack included Obama asking for congressional approval to invade Syria and the drafting of the "Authorization for the Use of Military Force Against the Government of Syria to Respond to Use of Chemical Weapons" bill (Congress, 2013), Human Rights Watch (HRW) releasing a denouncing report and the United Nations (UN) passing a resolution asking for an investigation into the attack.

Syria was thus both in danger of being attacked by the US and faced growing normative pressure from the international community. However, an American invasion never took place: Syria and the Russian Federation (Russia) jointly proposed to place Syria's stockpile under international control, preventing further military escalation. Syria formally acceded to the CWC on the 14th September 2013, while the US and Russia signed the "Framework for the Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons", agreeing upon eliminating the entirety of the Syrian chemical weapons stockpile. Finally, on the 16th October 2013, the OPCW-UN Joint Mission was formally established, with the mandate to oversee the elimination of the Syrian chemical weapons programme.

According to the theory of norm cascades proposed by Finnemore and Sikkink, international norms are critical for

understanding the motives behind treaty commitment. In their 1998 essay 'Norm Dynamics and Political Change', Finnemore and Sikkink propose that norms are established by going through a "life cycle" (892) and can be understood as a three-stage process made up of norm emergence, norm cascade and internalization: Once a "critical mass" of states adopts a norm, a norm cascade emerges, leading other states to emulate this behavior and to also adopt this norm. During this stage, states may be motivated to adopt norms due to concerns over legitimacy, esteem and reputation (898). Towards the end of a cascade, a norm becomes a "standard of appropriate behaviour" (891) and norm-breaking behaviour "generates disapproval or stigma" (892). Therefore, not every state must be convinced of a norm in order to adopt it: The legitimacy an established norm brings is an incentive for states to commit to it. This is supported by Simmons, who argues that governments are primarily concerned with their reputation and join international commitments for signalling purposes, publicly demonstrating their will to comply with the standards of the international community (Simmons, 2000, 821). Signalling concerns are of particular importance to states suffering credibility issues, to mark themselves "true reformers" (Ibid., 821) and gain valuable support in the international community. In this framework, the UN acts as a political legitimizer, as Security Council Resolutions and UN membership influence a country's reputation (Claude, in Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, 889). This theory shows the international power of norms and the facilitating role of international organizations in influencing states to join intergovernmental commitments.

Norm cascades can account for the Syrian accession to the CWC, as in 2013, with 98% of all states having signed and ratified the convention (OPCW), the "critical mass" of support had long been fulfilled and the norm was already in the end of the second stage of its life cycle: the norm cascade. With international pressure following the Ghouta attack, Syria faced an unprecedented threat against legitimacy as one of the only countries to have not yet signed the CWC. Norm theorists would point to the previously discussed backlash against this decision as evidence of international pressure that Syria eventually succumbed to. Evidence to support this should show that Syria was indeed concerned with issues of legitimacy/reputation and that the Ghouta attack resulted in unprecedented, heightened international pressure. It should further show that they in fact succumbed to this international pressure.

Syria's decision to commit to the Chemical Weapons Convention could also be explained by its urge to secure state survival at all costs, an explanation that rests on a realist analysis rather than a normative approach. Realists place state survival and national security at the heart of foreign policy concerns, arguing that states exist in an anarchical, self-help based system – where every state ensures their own survival first and foremost. Krasner argues that states thus operate from a base perspective of "egoist self-interest" (1982, 195), engaging in cooperation only when it benefits their rational self-interested foreign policy goals. He claims that the motivating factor for states in joining international commitments is an attempt to increase their participatory advantage, not a desire to accede to a normative international standard. However, a neorealist understanding alone does not explain Syria's decision to join the CWC so late – in order to gain a realist understanding of Syria's policy *change,* a comprehensive understanding of both external pressures and internal receptiveness is necessary. As neorealist considerations lack a wider understanding for the transmission of power into policy, this essay will thus rest on the tenets of neoclassical realism.

Taking the most important aspects of neorealism into account, neoclassical realism argues that power and self-interest establish the basic parameters of a country's foreign policy, but that there is no immediate transmission from threat to action. As such, they take two unit-level intervening variables into account: First, policymakers' perception of a threat, and second, domestic state structure (Rose, 1998, 152) . Under the neoclassical realist explanatory framework, Syria thus acceded to the convention as a self-help measure, protecting itself against the threat of a US air strike which policymakers took seriously . Supporting evidence should show that a possible US airstrike was an objectively serious military threat to Syria and that the unit-level intervening variables made the Syrian government take this threat seriously. It should furthermore demonstrate that the timing of Assad's decision to commit to the Convention can be conclusively tied back to imminent military action and statements by US officials that the attack would not happen if Syria gave up its chemical weapons.

For norm theory to be convincing, it must be shown that Syria is in fact concerned with its international reputation and that this reputation was damaged by the Ghouta attack, resulting in its adoption of the norm of eliminating chemical weapons. Whether Syria is concerned with international legitimacy can be best analysed by analyzing its previous concern/lack of concern for international legitimacy: Syria had previously demonstrated concern for its reputation, as

indicated by previous attempts to save face after chemical weapons attacks: In March 2013, the Syrian government had requested that an investigation be conducted by the UN Secretary-Generalto investigate allegations of chemical weapons use, alleging that it had not been the government who had conducted the attack (Makdisi & Hindawi, 2017, 1696). This attempt at generating legitimacy was mirrored post-Ghouta: Described by the New York Times as an "apparent burst of transparency" (2013), Syria admitted to having chemical weapons openly for the first time, suddenly seemingly fully cooperating with the OPCW and UN.

Despite these indications of Syrian concern for legitimacy, the question arises of whether the Syrian regime's reputation was indeed more severely threatened by the chemical weapons attack than it had already been previously. Evidence of this newly heightened concern, and thus of an incentive for the Syrian government to act is evident from the criticism of the Syrian government by human rights organisations, Western states and the UN after the attack. This resulted in an "unprecedented" (Naqvi, 2017, 961) fact finding mission, one of many signals of the international community's unprecedented condemnation of Syria's violation of international norms and of the immense pressure the state faced as a result. That Syria, a state with credibility issues, joined the CWC as a "signal" to gain legitimacy, is also supported by its especially strong desire to demonstrate accession to this international norm: In the letter in which Syria announced its accession, Assad indicated that Syria would skip the stipulated 30-day leniency period and immediately follow CWC stipulation (Armscontrol, 2020).This showcases Assad's strong desire to send a signal that Syria was committed to eliminating its development, production, stockpiling and use of chemical weapons, acting in a way that mirrors Simmons' prediction as to how states with credibility issues act.

However, not all evidence points towards a normative framework being able to account for the Syrian change of heart. While the Syrian government seems to be driven by some kind of desire for international recognition, it is also true that Syria has been deemed illegitimate and faced international pressure for quite some time. Called names such as "Pariah state" by major Western media outlets (e.g. Open Democracy, 2008), the Syrian government is subject to heavily negative Western dialogue and a number of sanctions, most notably those of the US, demonstrating that legitimacy pressure plagued the Syrian state before the Ghouta attack as well. Immediately after the attack, Syria's most important ally, Russia, supported Syria, with Putin stating that he was convinced the attack was "nothing more than a provocation by those who want to drag other countries into the Syrian conflict" (Ray, 2013). Despite the mounting pressures on the Syrian regime, the *structure* of normative legitimacy pressures did not change: Those countries condemning Syria's violation had been applying normative pressure for longer, and Syria was still able to rely on the allies providing counterbalance to this condemnation.

If the neoclassical realist approach was correct, it needs to be shown that Syria was at threat of a military attack by the United States and that it also perceived this threat seriously. According Rose's "intervening variables", it is not just relevant that the US threatened an attack, but also that the US has significantly greater relative power than Syria, making the perception of the US entering the war catastrophic, and that Assad perceived the US as willing to intervene: Syria's unique location as a battleground for larger states with hegemonies placed it at the nexus of the balance of power between states concerned with maintaining these hegemonies in the Middle East. With the US, Russia, Iran, and Saudi Arabia each supporting factions in the war to advance their own geopolitical goals, Assad's leadership became structurally dependent on the support of major allies. American military capabilities in the Middle East, when coupled with the strategic importance of the region for its geopolitical interests – in part due to the country's important alliances with Saudi Arabia and Israel, in part due to the growing Russian activity in the region – gave America a precedent and plausible reason to follow through on its threats if the "red line" were breached. Assad, knowing that the US' power-maximizing approach to Middle Eastern foreign policy meant that it could not risk damaging their credibility and power in the region by failing to follow up on threats, were forced to take America's threats of an invasion seriously. According to a neoclassical realist framework Syria would have thus acceded to the CWC due to both the objective threat of the US and its own perceptions of the threat's legitimacy.

While the normative approach provides great value in clearly demonstrating that Syria's actions post-Ghouta were partly performative and signal-sending, it ultimately fails in taking Syria's unique position fully into account. International legitimacy does play a role in informing a state's decision to join widely accepted treaties and legal obligations, however, having strong allies Syria, has (apart from few, isolated instances) demonstrated it does not need Western legitimacy to operate successfully. Syria's case is defined by the intervening variables only

neoclassical realism takes into account: Without the US's immense military power, Syria's geopolitical location as well as the US's historical readiness to intervene in the Middle East al-Bashar Assad would not have perceived the military threats as he did, ultimately leading to the by state survival driven decision to commit to the CWC. The neoclassical approach is thus the most appropriate framework in explaining why Syria joined the CWC.

In conclusion, it can be reiterated that the neoclassical realist framework is the superior framework in accounting for why Syria joined the Chemical Weapons Convention following the 2013 Ghouta chemical weapons attack. So how does this contribute to the wider debate between realists and norm theorists? Though institutionalists indirectly address a key aspect in leadership perceptions – namely, the importance of international credibility – their approach to the question of *why* states join international institutions is flawed, failing to provide the same explanatory value that neoclassical realism does. Syria's case evidences the fact that norm cascades alone do not guarantee the adoption of international frameworks. Rather, norm cascades can be reconciled with the strategic priorities that neoclassical realists emphasize – an adoption of a norm that has "cascaded" is, in many cases, a key part of a state's strategic attempts to maintain international security by avoiding a confrontation with more powerful states that may be driving the cascading of this norm forward. Neoclassical realists' emphasis of the importance of hegemony in driving forward norm cascades – a perspective that is validated by the importance of US threats in driving Syria's accession to the CWC – ultimately provides a stronger account for how norms disseminate. Ultimately, this essay showcases that nowadays realism must consider more factors than just balancing. Given the unchallenged hegemony of the US, balancing is ultimately futile for weaker states – actions such as Syria's may thus fall into an account of strategic realism even if they do not employ traditional power-balancing initiatives. Realist approaches can only stand the test of time if they allow for an analysis of how states seek security by leveraging institution rather than raw power-balancing.

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