

# THE SYRIAN CRISES AND NON-COMBATANT CASUALTIES: CONTEMPLATIONS ON THE HUMANITARIAN DIMENSIONS OF A JUST WAR

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## Abstract

The general objective of this paper is to utilize the just war theoretical framework in examining the implications of the Syrian crisis on women and children. The specific objectives therefore, are to (i) study the extent to which Syrian women and children have been adversely affected by the Syrian crisis and (ii) sensitize the international community on the avoidable indignities and inhumanities suffered by vulnerable women and children, during escalated intra-state conflicts. In the final analysis, opines the paper, a just war must minimize the incidence of noncombatant casualties, particularly women and children. This is the challenge of the international community in the Syrian crisis.

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**Keywords:** Syrian Crisis, Non-Combatant Casualties, Humanitarian Dimension, Just War

## Introduction

The crisis in Syria was prompted by protests in mid-March 2011 calling for the release of political prisoners (Sinjab, 2011). Mascarenhas (2013) highlights that inspired by the Arab Spring movement taking hold of the region, pro-democracy protests broke out across Syria in 2011, which resulted in Syrian forces violently suppressing multiple rallies. After protestors in Damascus and Deraa demanded the release of political prisoners, Syrian security forces shot down a number of civilians, which sparked weeks of unrest that slowly moved throughout the country within months. Hence, the Syrian crisis is above all, about the tyranny of the al-Assad dynasty. Mascarenhas (2013) explains that Bashar al-Assad was “elected” president in the year 2000, after the death of his dictator father, Hafez al-Assad as strongman of Syria. There was of course no opposing candidate, yet he claimed 97% of the votes. The elder al-Assad had seized

power in 1970, in an internal Ba'ath Party coup and became the newly “elected” president of Syria and during his thirty years’ dictatorship, succeeded in keeping any potential enemies at bay, by creating divisions among those in a position to challenge his authority. Following in his father's dictatorial footsteps, Bashar ruled with an iron fist by detaining members of parliament and other pro-reform activists that challenged his authority (Mascarenhas, 2013). Thus, in Syria, it is not the Facebook generation that is taking to the streets. It is people who are tired of poverty and repression (Sinjab, 2011). The general objective of this paper is to utilize the just war theoretical framework, in examining the implications of the Syrian crisis on Syrian women and children. The specific objectives therefore, are to (i) study the extent to which Syrian women and children have been displaced in the Syrian crisis and (ii) sensitize the international community on the avoidable indignities and inhumanities suffered by vulnerable women and children, during escalated intra-state conflicts. The methodology for the paper is logical argumentation. The theoretical framework is the just war theory.

St Augustine is usually credited with the origination of the just war theory. However, according to Moseley (2009), although St. Augustine provided comments on the morality of war from the Christian perspective (railing against the love of violence that war can engender), as did several Arabic commentators in the 9th to 12th centuries, the most systematic exposition in the Western tradition and one that still attracts attention was outlined by Saint Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century. Moseley (2009) had earlier highlighted that just war theory deals with the justification of how and why wars are fought. The justification can be either theoretical or historical. The theoretical aspect is concerned with ethically justifying war and the forms that warfare may or may not take. The historical aspect, or the “just war tradition,” deals with the historical body of rules or agreements that have applied in various wars across the ages (Moseley, 2009). In this paper, we are mainly interested in the forms that warfare may or may not take. The paper therefore is specifically more interested in the humanitarian dimension of the just war theory than in its historical aspects.

### **Women, children and the Syrian crisis**

ICRC (2009) has demonstrated as follows: Conflict increases the vulnerability of those who are already vulnerable, especially children. A child needs a family and a community that provide a nurturing and protective environment. The effects of war on the young can be devastating (ICRC, 2009). Indeed, in the Syrian crisis, the effects of war on women and children have been tragic and devastating. As at the end of May 2013, more than 2.4 million Syrians were being hosted as refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt and Jordan. There was a massive escalation of refugee arrivals in

2013, with the expectation that by the end of the year, over 3 million Syrians would have left their country. Incidentally, women and children make up three-quarters of the Syrian refugee population ([unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/syria.php](http://unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/syria.php)). Mascarenhas (2013) further records that the Zaatari refugee camp, about eight miles inside Jordan, on the Syria border, is a tent city sprung from the desert. The Zaatari camp is home to roughly 120,000-160,000 refugees fleeing the civil war. It is largely a city of women and children. About 60,000 of the camp's residents are children. It has become Jordan's fifth-largest city. Hence, Mascarenhas (2013) argues that in the back-and-forth diplomatic and political saga regarding the Syrian civil war, the human element has sometimes been left out and that the brewing humanitarian crisis in the region is yet another layer in this mass tragedy which has claimed over 100,000 lives (6,000 of which have been children). UNICEF (2014) further reveals that as the conflict in Syria approached the end of its third year, the availability of basic social services reached a deplorable point, with the devastating impacts felt by millions of children. Unrelenting violence, massive population-displacement, damage to infrastructure and essential services, have left approximately 9.3 million people or 40 per cent of the population in need of humanitarian assistance. Nearly 6.5 million people have been displaced and are struggling to survive in increasingly desperate conditions, and 4.27 million children have been directly affected by the crisis. Children who have been exposed to the horrors of war and have witnessed unspeakable cruelties are suffering from psychological distress. Children are paying the heaviest price. Close to 2.3 million boys and girls in Syria are still out of school or are at risk of dropping out of school. Lack of access to clean water, hygiene and sanitation, combined with deteriorating food security is raising serious concerns about the nutritional status of children. Over 200,000 children under 5 may be at risk of under nutrition. The collapsing healthcare and water systems are exposing children to infectious diseases. In November 2013, Syria confirmed 17 cases of wild poliovirus, the first confirmed cases since 1999 (UNICEF, 2014).

Wolfe (2013) reports that the Syrian crisis has entailed a massive rape dimension. She highlights that although most coverage of the Syrian civil war tends to focus on the fighting between the two sides, this war, like most, has a more insidious dimension: rape has been reportedly used widely as a tool of control, intimidation, and humiliation throughout the conflict. And its effects, while not always fatal, are creating a nation of traumatized survivors - everyone from the direct victims of the attacks to their children, who may have witnessed or otherwise affected by what has been perpetrated on their relatives (Wolfe, 2013). Therefore, the continuing subjection of women and children to acts that indeed amount to bestiality, during violent

conflicts and full-blown wars suggests that our world has not really made fundamental progress. Nagel (1972:127) posits: the policy of attacking the civilian population in order to induce an enemy to surrender, or to damage his morale, seems to have been widely accepted in the civilized world and seems to be accepted still, at least if the stakes are high enough. It gives evidence of a moral conviction that the deliberate killing of noncombatants - women, children, and old people - is permissible if enough can be gained by it. This follows from the more general position that any means can in principle be justified if it leads to a sufficiently worthy end (Nagel, 1972:127). More than three decades after, the Syrian crisis supplies yet another evidence of the thinking that during violent conflicts, the deliberate killing of noncombatants - women, children, and old people - is permissible if enough can be gained by it. But what may be gained by warring factions of a nation-state, in decimating their own population and dehumanizing their women and children would remain difficult to understand. Nagel (1972:127) argued that this inclination seemed to have been widely accepted in the civilized world and seems to be accepted still. This paper opines that the world that accepts this form of bestiality can not in any way ever be described as a civilized world.

### **The sectarian angle to the Syrian crisis**

Lekic (2012), citing a U.N. human rights report, highlights that Syria's civil war is increasingly turning into a sectarian conflict, pitting majority Sunni rebels against government forces, supported by the country's religious and ethnic minorities. While the sectarian divide is sharpest between the Sunnis and Allawite communities - from which most of the senior government and military leaders hail - other minority groups have been increasingly drawn into the conflict. The conflict has become overtly sectarian in nature. Almost all of the 80,000 Christians who used to live in the central town of Homs, the scene of intense fighting between the warring sides have fled to Damascus or Beirut. Jabhat al-Nusra, the largest grouping of foreign jihadists in Syria, is said to have a significant presence in Homs. Tveit (2013) decries the situation whereby religious communities are being targeted in acts of violence aimed at dividing and manipulating the nation. This same scenario usually plays out in other conflict situations in the world. Religious leaders must rise in unison to fight against the penchant of man to fight for the gods. The refugee problems do not recognize religious divides. Refugees are refugees.

Furthermore on the sectarian dimension to the crisis in Syria, Mestou (2012) posits: As part of its campaign against all pro-democracy activists, the Syrian regime has been persecuting Christian citizens and clergy, who take part in the revolution. The Syrian regime issued instructions to all banks

across the country to stop transactions with the Greek Orthodox Mariamite Church on charges of money laundering. This step was taken right after the church started receiving money from churches abroad, to support Syrian revolutionaries. Security forces allegedly killed Christian activist, Friday Hossam Mikhail for links with the Free Syrian Army. The Syrian army also, allegedly killed Priest Basilius Nassar, although the State TV held terrorist groups accountable for his death. Nassar was believed to be delivering food to areas attacked by the Syrian army and was helping doctors out in Hama. Nassar was also believed to have been killed while rescuing a victim of an army attack in the Jarajmah neighborhood in Hama.

Syrian forces also fired a non-explosive missile at the Convent of our Lady of Saidnaya, north of the capital Damascus, after knowing that its monks were involved in delivering medicine and supplies to bombed areas. In addition to delivering supplies to victims, several churches in Damascus and other Syrian cities, have been giving lectures against the Syrian regime and its brutal repression of peaceful protestors. Individual Christian activists are also harassed by the regime, as many of them are summoned for interrogation on almost monthly basis, while others receive threats, whether directly or through their family members to stop taking part in the revolution or be killed. This drove several Christians to leave the country, like activist Yara Nosseir who took part in protests in Christian neighborhoods in Damascus. Christians were more outraged at the regime, after security forces attacked the historic Syriac Orthodox Um al-Zennar Church in Homs and stole its contents. This incident was followed by a remarkable participation of Christians in anti-regime protests. Anti-regime Christians have also established dozens of pages on the social networking website, Facebook and which are all dedicated to posting news and videos about the revolution. However, many members of the Christian community in Syria, still take the regime's side (Mestou, 2012). This fully suggests that sectarianism is diversionary from the central issues in the Syrian crisis, which critically borders on tyranny and its inhumanities.

### **The role of China and Russia in the intractability of the Syrian crises**

According to Mascarenhas (2013), although the U.S. and Britain are making moves to take possible military action in Syria, China and Russia are against any attack on the country. Gladstone (2012) had earlier reported as follows: Diplomatic efforts at the United Nations Security Council to address the Syria crisis suffered a potentially fatal blow, when Russia and China vetoed a British-sponsored resolution that would have punished the Syrian government with economic sanctions for failing to carry out a peace plan. It was the third time that Russia and China had vetoed resolutions on Syria since the uprising against President Bashar al-Assad began, and the collegial

atmosphere in the Security Council chambers was tinged with bitterness and acrimony afterward.

Laub and Masters (2013) narrate that both Russia and China have significant economic and military relations with Syria. As permanent members of the UN Security Council, the duo has vetoed three resolutions designed to isolate the Assad regime. Attempting to fathom a guess for the Russia-Sino veto, Gladstone (2012) suggests: Russia and China, embittered by Security Council actions last year that led to Western military intervention in Libya and the downfall of its longtime leader, Muammar el-Qaddafi, are intent on avoiding a repeat in Syria. They have consistently objected to any resolutions concerning Syria that would impose sanctions or criticize Mr. Assad for his efforts to crush an increasingly violent rebellion against his family's four-decade hold on power. Russia, Mr. Assad's most important foreign backer, has also accused the West of funneling support to Mr. Assad's opponents. According to Brennan (2013), despite Chinese rhetoric of supporting a political solution, its actions suggest otherwise. China has many interests in Syria, which are guiding its actions. Aside from strong economic and military ties to Assad's government, which predate the current crisis, China fears radicalization of its own Sunni-majority Muslim population, some of whom it accuses of travelling to Syria for combat training with the rebels. Assad's survival is also tied up in a Chinese geostrategic consideration of the energy-rich Middle East, whereby supporting Assad is seen as an effective block on Western powers in the region. Moreover, the Chinese government is nervous of creating a precedent for intervention on human-rights grounds due to its own insecurities at home (Brennan, 2013). As permanent members of the Security Council, the joint opposing stands of Russia and China, thus remains the most crucial negative factor to a globally concerted action in Syria. In the meantime, the occasioning dehumanization of man continues, with women and children at the worst ebb of the brutalizing experience.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, we highlight the views of Tveit (2013), who opines that at the beginning of the peaceful uprising in Syria; reclaiming freedom, dignity and equal citizenship, seemed to be a sign of hope for the Syrian people and for the whole region. We are now looking at a completely different and tragic picture (Tveit, 2013). Thus, from the angle of the opposition, the crisis in Syria was tantamount to a just war. Hence, the deposition of tyranny may be a justification for a just war. However, when the desire to depose tyranny occasions large-scale cases of death and more so, the dehumanization and subsequent deaths of women and children, the basis of this justification becomes questionable.

The internal crises that frequently snowball into the international ding-dong battles, pitting intra-state leaders against each other; international community's leaders and specific intervening nations against one another, are after all, principally about the rest of us. The contentious issues that usually lead to the drawing of the battle lines have never been declared to be about the personal egos of the statesmen or rebel leaders or the combatant reputation of the intervening states. The contentious issues have always been claimed to be about the rest of us. In this dimension, we are all stakeholders in finding solution to the continued destruction of human lives on a global scale and the death of women and children in these crises. In essence, the plight of women and children in these crises is a major dent to the claims of our generation that massive progress has been comparatively made by us. The magnitude of the mortal pain being experienced by women and children in the ongoing Syrian crisis, places a moral responsibility on the rest of us, to say no to global violence in general and man's inhumanity to women and children in particular. Indeed, there is United Nations' confirmation that chemical weapons have been repeatedly used in the Syrian battle. The Syrian government and the opposition have accused each other of using chemical weapons, and both have denied it (Charbonneau and Nichols, 2013). The truth remains that chemical weapons have been used and this may provide the ultimate reason for a decisive intervention by the international community. However, as deadly as the use of chemical weapons may appear, the mortal pains of women and children also provide compelling reasons for an accelerated pace of action, in bringing the nearly four years' old deadly confusion in Syria to an end. In the final analysis, a just war must minimize the incidence of noncombatant victims, particularly women and children. This is the challenge of the international community in the Syrian crisis.

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