

Assads' Regime Change: Adoption of the UN Resolution 2139 and Humanitarian Crises in Syria

Uba-Uzoagwa Osinachi Peter¹, Obieke Ugochukwu Christian² & Nwokoma Uchenna Bartholomew^{3*}

1.Department of Political Science, Faculty of the Social Sciences, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

2,3.Department of Public Administration & Local Government, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

1,2,3.Social Science Unit, School of General Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

*Corresponding Author Email: uchenna.nwokoma@unn.end.ng

ORCID: ¹<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3864-8051>

Abstract

The United Nations reports that a significant portion of the global population lacks access to life-saving relief items, with one in three people unable to meet their basic food needs. In Syria, an estimated 8.7 million people require various forms of food security assistance. Studies have documented targeted attacks on hospitals, medical supplies, healthcare facilities, personnel, ambulances, and fire trucks. However, despite the depth of existing research, the link between UN Resolution 2139 and the humanitarian crisis in Syria remains underexplored. This study examines whether the adoption of UN Resolution 2139 had a measurable impact on the humanitarian crisis in Syria between 2011 and 2024, particularly in relation to the eventual decline of the Assad regime. Drawing on Structural Realism (Neo-realism) as an analytical framework, the study evaluates the limitations of UN interventions in effectively managing the Syrian conflict. Employing a longitudinal research design and a documentary method for data collection, the study applies content analysis and systematic logical deductions for data interpretation. Findings indicate that the adoption of UN Resolution 2139 exacerbated the humanitarian crisis in Syria and failed to prevent the eventual downfall of the Assad regime. Moreover, the UN Security Council's efforts to uphold human rights in Syria have been significantly hindered by geopolitical rivalries among its member states.

Keywords: *United Nations, Resolution 2139, Assads' Regime, Syrian Crisis, Humanitarian Crises.*

INTRODUCTION

The Syrian crisis began in March 2011 as a result of the Arab Spring, a wave of uprisings that had already led to the removal of the presidents of Tunisia and Egypt and had spread across multiple Arab nations. In Syria, this movement reignited the aspirations of pro-democracy advocates who had long awaited a chance to voice their frustrations. Years of restricted freedoms and economic hardship had created a tense atmosphere, and the government's harsh response to a group of students who had written anti-regime graffiti in solidarity with the Arab Spring served as a catalyst for widespread outrage. This discontent quickly escalated, prompting citizens to engage in peaceful street protests to express their opposition to the Assad-led government (Mostafiz, 2013). The government responded by cracking down hard on protesters. The army opened fire killing four innocent people. The following day, more protesters were killed by the Army, many more were imprisoned. Soon the unrest triggered nationwide protests demanding Assad's resignation. In July 2011, military defectors formed the Free Syrian Army, a rebel group seeking to topple the government, pushing Syria toward civil war. Since then, the conflict has worsened, creating a humanitarian crisis that poses a major threat to Middle East stability (Pedram, 2014).

Multiple foreign nations have intervened in the Syrian conflict, supporting either the Assad regime or opposition forces, largely to protect their own national interests. The Syrian government has received support from Hezbollah, Iran, and Russia, while the U.S., along with several regional and European allies, has aided specific opposition factions (European Asylum Support Office, 2019). This division reveals that the conflict's core is a power struggle between two global players—Russia and the U.S.—turning Syria into a proxy war. Direct foreign involvement intensified in 2012 when Hezbollah, backed by Iran, joined the fight for Assad, likely countering indirect support from the U.S., Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, who were funding the Syrian National Coalition through Turkey and Jordan (Adigbuo, 2014; Khashanah, 2014). In 2013, after a delayed response, the U.S. launched direct attacks against pro-Assad forces, prompted by allegations of chemical weapon use by the regime (Cozma & Kozman, 2015). The conflict escalated further in 2014 with ISIL's emergence, aiming to establish an Islamic Caliphate. Russia entered later in 2015, launching airstrikes on ISIL targets, reportedly at Assad's request (Swaine, 2012).

Efforts to negotiate peace between the Syrian government and the opposition have seen little success. The first UN-led talks took place in Geneva in 2012 but achieved limited progress. By December 2017, negotiations collapsed due to disagreements over President Assad's role in a transitional government (Asseburg, Lacher & Transfeld, 2018). Hezbollah and Iran's continued military support for Assad likely aimed to discourage deeper foreign involvement, particularly from the U.S., which had been supplying arms and funds to opposition groups (Adigbuo, 2014; Khashanah, 2014).

To mitigate the conflict, the United Nations, as the multilateral organization, has consistently put forth resolutions condemning rights abuses and calling upon the Syrian Arab Republic to put an end to its attacks on civilians. It has also intervened to directly manage the conflict. For instance, the United Nations common system in Syria consist of sixteen resident entities and offices including FAO, OCHA, OSE, UNDOF, UNDP, UNDSS, UNFPA, UNHABITAT, UNHCR, UNICEF, among others. In addition, not a few UN bodies, including the Human Rights Council, the General Assembly, and the Security Council, have responded to the escalating crisis in Syria. Against the backdrop of the United Nations intervention and supervisory roles in Syria, it has become imperative to examine the extent UN has fared in managing the Syrian crisis.

Existing literature on the topic is broadly categorized into two schools of thought. The first adopts a realist analytical framework, while the second is based on political economy analysis. The realist school contends that the Syrian conflict reflects a revival of great power politics between the United States and Russia, similar to dynamics during the Cold War. They argue that the ongoing geopolitical rivalry between both powers in Syria and the broader Middle East has fueled and prolonged the conflict, hindering effective resolution. According to this view, the conflict is essentially a geopolitical contest for influence, with both nations aiming to limit each other's dominance in the region. These scholars further claim that the war aligns with the U.S. grand strategy to push Russia out of the Middle East, block China's access to key resources, enforce regime change, promote democratization, and maintain global supremacy. Prominent proponents include Menkiszak (2013), Hove and Mutanda (2015), Plakoudas (2016), Muharrem (2017), Carpenter (2013), and Pispinò (2017), who argue that Russia's position in the conflict is shaped by its perception of U.S. foreign policy. The second school of thought - Johnson (2015), Freeman (2016), Szénási (2017), Guner and Dilan (2017), among others, argue that the Syrian conflict is a conflict for access to oil and control of

pipelines. United States want to thwart a Russia-backed attempt to build an Iran-Iraq-Syria gas pipeline that was to be built between 2014 and 2016 from Iran's giant South Pars field through Iraq and Syria. With a possible extension to Lebanon, it would eventually reach Europe, the target export market. USA and her allies are interested to build a more northbound pipeline from Qatar and Saudi Arabia via Syria and Turkey. Syria being a key link in this chain needs to be governed by a West-friendly regime. The European Union, a major US ally, beneath its superficial performance of trying to halt the refugee crisis, in reality wants to ensure that the gas gets into its citizens' homes.

Yet Another group of scholars – Fernanda and Patrícia (2017) Muriel, Wolfram and Mareike (2018), Faisal and Mohd (2017) among others argue that United Nations has failed to provide the necessary protection to the Syrian population in a state of vulnerability. To these scholars, the UN special envoys have failed to achieve a negotiated resolution to the conflict or even effective conflict management or contributed significantly to protecting civilians. United Nations is very helpless in controlling the situation in Syria as all the members of UNSC are involved in, directly or indirectly

Most worrisome, however, is the fact that despite the profundity and undoubted logical elegance of these studies, they do not deal directly with the linkages between the adoption of UN resolution 2139 and humanitarian crisis in Syria. Most of the extant literature focuses either on the failure of UN to provide the necessary protection to the Syrian population or its inability to secure resolution to the conflict. Therefore, on the strength of the above, the following question is put forward to guide the study.

- How did the adoption of the UN resolution 2139 impact on the humanitarian crises in Syria between 2011 and 2024 preceding the fall of the state?

Gap in the Literature

What seems to emerge from the review of the extant literature indicates that scholars have explored the actions and interventions of international forces, especially the big powers and the consequent humanitarian crisis in Syria. However, despite the logical elegance of these studies as reviewed above, none adequately explored the link between UN Resolution 2139 and humanitarian crises in Syria preceding Assads' regime change. Many of the works focused on high levels of civilian casualties and injuries, the destruction of civilian infrastructure, mass displacement and dire humanitarian situation already characterized by widespread acute needs. Thus, there is a need for further studies on this aspect of literature. This work, therefore, is an attempt to address this knowledge gap.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs core concepts from Structural Realism, also known as Neo-Realism, to examine why the United Nations has struggled to effectively manage the Syrian conflict. Structural Realism diverges from Classical Realism, which attributes international political dynamics to egoistic and selfish human nature influencing state behavior. Instead, Structural Realism argues that it is the international system's structure that dictates how states behave.

Neo-Realist scholars like Hanami (2003), Mearsheimer (2001), Buzan (1993), Oye (1986), Waltz (1979), Jervis (1978), and Herz (1951) assert that the anarchy within the international system drives global politics. Waltz (1979), a key proponent, states in Theory of International Politics that a system's structure arises from interactions among its main

components—namely, states. He explains that state behavior is shaped by the system's structure through socialization and competition. In this view, structure acts as an intervening variable between state actions and outcomes. Neo-Realists argue that power struggles in global politics stem not from state nature but from the system's anarchic structure. Each state competes to maximize power while preventing any other from becoming dominant (Mearsheimer, 1994, p. 9). From the analysis, their basic assumptions include:

- 1) In international system, states act based on self-help: They operate with the aim of survival and their interactions with other states reflect their desire to survive.
- 2) All states possess some offensive military capability and therefore cannot be certain of the intentions of other states.
- 3) The structure only changes if great powers take actions that will lead to a change. Most states have no power to change the structure. Given this context, states as rational actors will try to balance against each other because they will try to increase their chance of survival.
- 4) In their quest for security, states aim to enhance their capabilities relative to rivals. Ensuring territorial, economic, and military security forms the core of a state's national interest. However, the extent of a state's capabilities compared to others either limits or enables the pursuit of these interests.

In an anarchic international system, states pursue power to survive, leading to a security dilemma where they constantly feel threatened by possible attacks. As Waltz states, "where no one commands by virtue of authority, no one is obliged to obey" (Waltz 1979, pp. 88–93). While Neo-realists agree the system's structure drives the quest for security, they differ on whether states seek only survival or aim to maximize relative power. Accordingly, there are two strands of thoughts in structural realism. Offensive Realists argued that the anarchic nature of the international system forces states to be aggressive. Mearsheimer (2001, p.1), the chief proponent of Offensive Realism holds that international politics has always been ruthless and dangerous—and likely will remain so. Though the intensity of competition varies, great powers fear one another and continually compete for power. Each state's main goal is to maximize its share of global power, often at the expense of others.

Application of the Theory

The link between United Nations intervention and the Syrian conflict is explained through Structural Realism. This theory assumes that the anarchic international system compels each state to define its interests and strive independently for its security and survival. We argue, therefore, that members of the United Nations, especially the 'big five' are mindful of their strategic and politico-economic interests in Syria which they are striving to protect. This explains the inability of UN's numerous interventions in Syria to produce the desired result, which is resolution of the conflict. As a multilateral organisation, the United Nations operates through its members. Although there are over one hundred sovereign states that make the organisation, the formulation and implementation of its policy is driven primarily by the five permanent members of the organisation. The relevance of this theory in the understanding of the inability of United Nations to effectively manage the Syrian Conflict cannot be overemphasized. The theory illuminates the understanding of the nature of international politics which is unravelling in Syria. It reveals that United Nations, as a multilateral organisation, is usually handicapped in the performance of its primary responsibility of

ensuring collective security, if the interests of the world powers are diametrically opposed to each other.

The theory helps explain the main factor shaping the United Nations' behavior and policies in Syria. The structure of the international system shapes state behavior, with anarchy being the driving force of international politics. The key implication is that if the United States and Russia continue pursuing aggressive, conflicting policies in Syria to protect their interests and enhance their power, the influence of international organizations like the United Nations weakens, worsening the humanitarian crisis. Thus, the inability of United Nations interventions to ensure collective security in Syria with a view to mitigating the lingering crisis there is explained in the light of Structural Realism.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a longitudinal research design. Longitudinal design involves observing several variables for sometimes (Cherry, 2020). Longitudinal study observes the same sample is repeatedly observed over a period. This enables researchers not only to observe and measure changes in variables over time but to associate them with their causal factors. Put simply, longitudinal design allows for changes in variables to be observed and measured by researchers over time and to relate them to their causal factors. In conducting our investigation, therefore, we closely and retrospectively observed the trends in the deployment of the UN supervision in Syria, with a view to determining the patterns and forces at play over time. This enabled us to generate the relevant data to determine their impact on the management of the Syrian conflict. Secondly, we closely and retrospectively observed the adoption of the UN resolution 2139 to ascertain how they impacted the humanitarian crises in Syria within the study period.

Methods of Data Collection

The study relied on documentary method to generate the relevant data due to the nature of the study as well as the type of data required to test and validate the hypotheses. Basic to the understanding of the logical adoption of the documentary method is that it tangentially relies on secondary data. Thus, the study relied on institutional/official documents and publications from United Nations Security Council Resolutions, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, United States Department, Russia Foreign Ministry, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, among several others.

Method of Data Analysis

In this study, we adopted content analysis combined with systematic logical deductions. In doing this, attempt was made to sieve and analyse the relevant qualitative data. Content analysis is valuable in organizational research because it allows researchers to recover and examine the nuances of organizational behaviours and societal trends. It is also an important bridge between purely quantitative and purely qualitative research methods.

DISCUSSION

United Nations Security Council Resolution 2139, adopted in February 2014, aimed to alleviate the humanitarian crisis in Syria by demanding unrestricted aid access and an end to attacks on civilians. However, its implementation was notably ineffective. Both the Syrian government and opposition forces frequently violated the resolution's terms, obstructing humanitarian aid and continuing hostilities (Amnesty International, 2014). The Security

Council's failure to enforce the resolution's provisions allowed these violations to persist, exacerbating civilian suffering (The New Humanitarian, 2015). Additionally, political divisions within the Council, particularly vetoes by Russia and China against measures to hold perpetrators accountable, undermined efforts to address war crimes and crimes against humanity (Amnesty International, 2014). This lack of accountability emboldened parties to the conflict to act with impunity, further hindering the resolution's objectives. Consequently, Resolution 2139 did not achieve its intended impact, highlighting the challenges of implementing international mandates in complex conflict situations.

At the heat of the conflict, the Syrian government regained control over opposition-held parts of Aleppo at the end of 2016. In their operation, the Russian-Syrian military coalition conducted indiscriminate air attacks, including strikes on several medical facilities, and used incendiary weapons and cluster munitions. The Violations Documentation Center (VDC), a local monitoring group, documented the killing of 446 civilians, including 91 children, in aerial attacks in eastern Aleppo between September 19 and October 18. While the number of civilian deaths in Southern Syria decreased following local ceasefire agreements, unlawful attacks persisted. In June, for example, Russian-Syrian airstrikes and artillery attacks targeted the town of Tafas, south of Daraa, killing 10 civilians near a school.

In September of the same year, the Russian-Syrian Joint Military Operation launched an offensive on Idlib province. Airstrikes hit several towns and surrounding areas, destroying six hospitals and five civil defense centres, killing over 150 civilians, according to the Syrian Civil Defense (<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/syria>). According to the 10th report of the Commission of Inquiry on Syria - A/HRC/30/48, released in August 2015, random aerial bombardment by the government forces continued to destroy and damage hospitals, field hospitals, clinics, medical equipment, drug stores, and power generators. These attacks have also caused temporary or permanent closure of health care facilities, which have become the main targets of the Assad regime, in a significant escalation of its policy since 2011. In the 14th annual report on the human rights situation in Syria, the Syrian Committee for Human Rights documented 167 attacks against hospitals and medical centers, as well as 43 ambulances, 32 fire trucks and a number of cars belonging to Syrian civil defense. They also documented the killing of 62 medical personnel and 44 workers and volunteers in the civil defense and Syrian Red Crescent during 2015. The Assad regime and its foreign allied forces were the primary perpetrators of most of the attacks against the Syrian health sector in 2015. They were responsible for 97% of all attacks documented by the Syrian Committee for Human Rights against health facilities and professionals.

Human Rights Watch noted that in 2017, government and pro-government forces, along with armed opposition groups, continued to besiege civilian areas and restrict humanitarian aid. The UN OCHA estimated that around 540,000 people were trapped in besieged areas by June 2017, mainly in Eastern Ghouta, besieged by government forces. Humanitarian conditions in opposition enclaves deteriorated rapidly in 2017, forcing communities in several areas to accept ceasefire and evacuation deals with the government. Several local "reconciliation" agreements were reached in 2017, including the "Four Towns Agreement" in March, which led to the evacuation of Madaya and Zabadani in exchange for Fouah and Kefraya, encircled by opposition groups. The UN Commission of Inquiry and Amnesty International have found some evacuations unlawful, constituting forced displacement. Studies conducted by Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) in 2016 on the impact of Sieges on women and the most vulnerable in Syria stated that siege impacts women severely and

disproportionately. The lack of food and medical care has negatively affected the health of pregnant and breastfeeding women, and led to higher infant mortality rates. The majority of pregnant women in besieged areas suffer from anemia, and cases of spontaneous abortion and deformity have increased. Studies show that it is possible to avoid 80 percent of maternal mortality during pregnancy and childbirth when access to health services is available. While women do the vast majority of work finding and preparing the scarce food, they are the last to eat and eat the least. In addition, the increased competition for scarce food resources inside besieged areas renders it significantly difficult for women to secure food and medicine, especially those who have become breadwinners due to their husband's absence (WILPF, 2016). The ongoing conflict in Syria has created an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. Half of the population has been displaced, with 6.6 million people internally displaced, many multiple times. Children and youth make up more than half of the displaced and those in need of humanitarian assistance (Hart et al., 2022). Among affected communities, life-threatening needs continue to rise. Neighbouring countries have restricted the admission of people fleeing Syria, leaving hundreds of thousands of people stranded in deplorable conditions on their borders. In some cases, these populations are beyond the reach of humanitarian actors (<http://www.unocha.org/syrian-arab-republic/about-ocha-syria>).

In the absence of a political solution to the conflict, intense and widespread hostilities persist. Since 2011, thousands of these refugees have risked drowning in the Mediterranean in hopes of finding a better life in Europe (<https://www.vox.com/2015/9/5/9265621/syrian-refugee-charts>). According to Flemming (2015), the reason why so many refugees are trying to leave the region is because the war in Syria shows no signs of ending. People continue to flee, and refugees in neighbouring countries are now losing hope that they can return (*Guardian Newspaper*, 25th October, 2015).

An estimated 11 million Syrians have fled their homes since the outbreak of the civil war in March 2011. Among those escaping the conflict, the majority have sought refuge in neighbouring countries or within Syria itself. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 4.8 million have fled to Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq, and 6.6 million are internally displaced within Syria. Meanwhile about one million have requested asylum to Europe. Germany, with more than 300,000 cumulated applications, and Sweden with 100,000, are EU's top receiving countries (<http://syrianrefugees.eu/>). As the war continues, hope is fading fast. Millions of Syrians have escaped across borders, fleeing the bombs and bullets that have devastated their homes. Turkey hosts the largest number of registered Syrian refugees – currently 3.3 million. Most Syrian refugees in the neighbouring countries live in urban areas, with around only 8 per cent accommodated in refugee camps. Table 1 highlights the worsening incidence of refugee and displacement in Syria.

Table 1: Worsening Syria Refugee and Displacement Crisis

S/N	Date(Month and Year)	Displaced Syrian Population
1	July, 2015	4.0 Million
2	January, 2016	4.6 million
3	March, 2016	4.7 million
4	October, 2016	4.8 million
5	January, 2017	4.6 million
6	March, 2017	5.2 million
7	December, 2017	6.6 million

Source: Compiled by the researcher from <http://www.unocha.org/Syria>

Since 2011, the Syrian conflict has resulted in at least 400,000 deaths, according to the World Bank. The UN reports 5 million refugees and over 6 million displaced internally. By June 2017, 540,000 people were still in besieged areas. Specia (2018) of the New York Times notes that the last widely accepted figure, 470,000 deaths, was reported by the Syrian Center for Policy Research in 2016. This group, based in Damascus until that year, was considered a reliable source, independent of both the government and opposition groups. However, the death toll has been increasing at an alarming rate since 2011 when the war began. In 2017 alone, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) reports that a total of 39,000 people including 10,204 civilians have been killed including 2,298 children and 1,536 women (<http://www.iamsyria.org/death-tolls.html>).

Previously, the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2139, aimed to address the escalating humanitarian crisis in Syria by demanding unrestricted access for humanitarian aid and an end to attacks on civilians (United Nations Security Council, 2014). Despite its clear directives, the resolution failed to establish stable peace in Syria. The Syrian government, under President Bashar al-Assad, and various opposition groups frequently violated the terms of the resolution, impeding aid deliveries and continuing hostilities (Sengupta, 2014). The lack of enforcement mechanisms within the resolution allowed parties to act with impunity, undermining its effectiveness (United Nations News Centre, 2014).

The resolution's inability to halt violence and ensure humanitarian access contributed to prolonged suffering and displacement among the Syrian population. Reports indicated that both government forces and rebel factions obstructed aid convoys, leading to severe shortages of essential supplies in besieged areas (Voice of America News, 2014). This persistent humanitarian crisis eroded public trust in international interventions and highlighted the limitations of UNSC resolutions lacking robust implementation strategies (Sengupta, 2014). In December 2024, a coalition of rebel groups, led by former Islamist factions, overthrew President al-Assad, ending over five decades of his family's rule (Associated Press, 2025). The new interim government, under President Ahmad al-Sharaa, pledged to establish the rule of law and protect minority rights (Hürriyet Daily News, 2024). However, the swift transition raised concerns about the inclusivity and stability of the new administration. Religious and ethnic minorities, such as the Druze community, expressed apprehension about their future status and demanded assurances of equal rights and representation (The Guardian, 2025).

The overthrow of al-Assad's regime underscored the international community's earlier failures to mediate a peaceful resolution through measures like Resolution 2139. The resolution's lack of enforcement allowed the conflict to escalate, ultimately leading to a violent power shift. The new government's ability to maintain peace remains uncertain, as it faces the challenge of uniting a fractured nation and addressing the diverse demands of its populace (Al Jazeera, 2025). This situation highlights the critical need for enforceable international resolutions and comprehensive peacebuilding strategies to prevent protracted conflicts and unstable transitions.

CONCLUSION

The Syrian conflict has led to the overthrow of al-Assad's regime, preceded by one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world despite the supervision of United Nations. The unparalleled suffering, destruction and disregard for human life in Syria have shocked the world's conscience. The deadly power play and bloodshed unraveled in the conflict has once again cast a grim picture of international politics that is driven by the interests of the focal

actors rather than the rules of multilateral organisations like the UN. The conflict has once again portrayed United Nations for what it truly is; a brutal arena where states look for opportunities to take advantage of each other and to do what it takes to achieve their national interests. And sometimes it doesn't matter that they are playing politics with people's lives. Suspicions, mistrust and disunited agendas of the key parties in the conflict has undermined the peace process. Worse still, cases of opposing sides breaching ceasefire agreements and indiscriminate attacks and airstrikes.

The fundamental implication of this theory is that in absolute terms, if United States and Russia continue to pursue their aggressive and conflicting policies in the world as did in Syria in order to protect their interests and enhance their relative power positions in the international system. The powers of international organizations such as United Nations is weakened with serious implications for humanitarian crisis. The end of the conflict highlighted the failure of the Syrian government.

Recommendations

In the light of our analyses of the study and subsequent findings, we put forward the following recommendation.

- ❖ The United States and Russia must urgently lead efforts to broker a ceasefire agreement between the Syrian government and opposition forces. A peace summit should be convened immediately, with a binding treaty crafted involving the U.S., Russia, the Arab League, the Assad regime, and the opposition forces. The resolution of the humanitarian crisis in Syria depends on the war's cessation, which will reopen communication channels and bring all parties back to the negotiating table.

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