

International Liberalism and Realism
Theories Applied to the Ethnic Conflicts in
Nigeria and Syria

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Theory of International Relations

Mon., Wed.; 4:10-5:30

May 16, 2018

This essay aims to focus on the ethnic conflicts plaguing Nigeria and Syria. First, one must understand what ethnic conflicts are and how they originate. Secondly, the essay will focus on specifically how ethnic conflicts have originated in Nigeria and Syria by exploring the histories of these two nations. Next, the essay will shift to focus on two International Relations Theories- Liberalism and Realism. Lastly, the essay will focus on both theories and offer possible solutions to these ethnic conflicts. Through the case studies of Nigeria and Syria, and the exploration of the International Liberalization and Realism Theories, one can create alternative theories for these crises.

Although ethnic conflicts are decreasing throughout the world, they are still evident and problematic to overcome, especially in the coming years. To understand ethnic conflicts, we must first discover where and how they originate. A social theorist, Gurr, has laid out several possible reasons as to why ethnic conflicts exist, however he admits that neither can completely explain this phenomenon. The first, he contends is that some groups simply have an “innate hatred” towards one another. The second, it is that ethnic conflicts manifest when politicians use ethnicities for political and material benefits.¹

Instead of arguing that ethnic conflicts only arise from ethnic identity, social scientists have discovered that poverty stricken and weak governments are to blame. In a report focusing on civil conflicts from 1945-1999, studied 127 civil conflicts and determined that \$1000, or less, per capita income is related to a 41% greater annual odd of a civil war onset. Furthermore, the study found that fractionalization efforts made up for a miniscule amount of why these conflicts arose.²

¹ “Ethnic Conflict.” InternationalRelations.org. Accessed May 12, 2018. <http://internationalrelations.org/ethnic-conflict/>.

² Ibid.

A more recent study by Saxon & Benson (2006), examined how ethnicity impacts violent and non-violent activities. The study focused on 130 “national peoples” from 1990-1998. Their studies suggest that socio-demographic, economic, and political actions impact group action equally. They also admit that these factors do not cause the entire conflict. Moreover, these factors set the stage for an eventual increase in “ethnic activity.” The type of regime would determine the government repression tactics; and, these tactics impact the way different groups respond to the government. For this reason, groups with access to resources (by the government), would be less likely to act violently. At the end of their research, Saxon & Benson concluded, “a shared ethnolinguistic identity gives groups of people the *basis* for organizational mobilization; mobilizational resources give them the *means* for such mobilization...; grievances provide the *reason* to mobilize; and a series of political factors structure the *opportunities* of the groups to contend in a conventional, violent and non-violent manner.”³

There are several theories as to why ethnic conflicts immerge. It is best to acknowledge that there are numerous variables that work together to explain ethnic conflicts. Many of these variables have nothing to do with the notion that deep ethnic hatred is at the root. Alternatively, one can contend that ethnic conflicts are significantly more likely in places that are poverty stricken and with inadequate political structures.⁴

To understand the ethnic conflict in Nigeria, it is pertinent to first understand colonization; and, to understand colonization one must first look at slavery. The supposed “colonial period” in Nigeria launched with the slave trade in the 15th century. Thanks to the Portuguese, the Nigerians saw an influx in wealth during this period. The Nigerian people, like

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

many other people in Africa, perpetrated the slave trade. Tribal differences and other ethnic dissimilarities led to the selling of prisoners of war who were sold to the Portuguese.⁵

After realizing that slavery was a disgusting, much outdated practice, the noble British sought to replace Portuguese slavery. In lieu of this practice, they British moved towards colonization. The British put their focus on acquiring goods to trade. Additionally, they sought to evangelize the people of this area to reject Islam and practice Christianity instead.

They dominated Nigeria by defeating different power heads and eventually procured more trade goods. Eventually they gained hold over the Royal Niger Company's territories. This gave them access to the lower regions of the Niger Delta. Leading under indirect rule, the British would give orders to local leaders who would govern the area. The British reaped the benefits of exporting the different crops, which included: cacao, peanuts, and palm oil. Because they led by indirect rule, the British did not have to confront the ethnic tensions directly, benefitting them even more.

The diverse population of Nigeria could only be successful to the British Empire if they used a "divide and rule policy." The policy kept various Nigerian groups as far from one another as possible. This necessitated that traditional authorities continued to lead in their previous territories. For this reason, Islam resisted the spread of Christianity in the north. The south, however, was more easily malleable and allowed for the growth of Christianity. Furthermore,

⁵ Alme, Kaitlyn. "Niger Delta Black Gold Blues: Colonial History of Nigeria: Slave Trade, Resource Extraction, and the Invention of a National Territory." Niger Delta Black Gold Blues: Can Writers Bring About Environmental Justice Where Slow Violence Has Proven So Devastating? Or a Cautionary Tale for Environmental Sacrifice Zones Worldwide. June 6, 2016. Accessed May 13, 2018. <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/niger-delta-black-gold-blues/12-colonial-subjugation-of-people-land-and-nature-slave-trade-resource-extraction-palm-oil-and-the-invention-of-a-national-territory-kaitlyn>

following WWII, Kamerun was divided among the League of Nations Mandate and the British acquired a section of the former German colony.

It soon proved increasingly difficult to control Nigeria because of its ethnic diversity. Additionally, the spread of Pan-Africanism and the desire to escape the racism of European domination inspired rebellions. The first political party sought to counter the British authority through farmers, the media, the youth, and the educated. The British reacted by gradually changing the governing stem in Nigeria. This was supposed to give Nigerians more of a voice in politics. However, it caused more divisions and disagreements.⁶

By 1960, Nigeria, like many other African colonies during this period, gained total independence. This caused fear among many groups in Nigeria, as they had seen the disagreements and disputes between groups. It became evident to many that the major ethnic group would have the control of the nation.⁷

Ethnicity plays a huge role in identity in Nigeria. Over 400 languages exist in Nigeria; however, only three of these languages are considered significant. The three language are distributed and are significant in understanding one's status in society. Because of this, someone's place in society is marked by what language they speak. Essentially, one's status in society is marked by their ethnicity.

Even though there are three predominant languages, Nigeria is mostly split in half regarding religion. In certain areas, traditional religions are still practiced. These groups are not as significant as the other two religions- Christianity and Islam. Sub-cleavages within these main religions has played a large role in anti-military struggles. For this reason, various ethnic

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

conflicts have arisen. Boko Haram, for instance, has had countless conflicts within the Muslim dominated Northern region.⁸

Language and religion are just a piece of the puzzle as to why Nigeria faces ethnic conflict. Education levels, for instance, have become one of the many issues causing conflict within the groups. Furthermore, Nigeria has only been independent for 58 years. They were left to deal with the destruction of colonization and had little to no aid when developing the government. This is no time to heal the apparent regionalism within the main ethnic groups, Igbo, Hausa, and Yoruba people.⁹

As a product of the Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire and their claim to the kingdom of Damascus, the Paris Peace conference sought to recognize their independence. However, France was resolute in effecting their deal with Britain. This concluded in the 1920 invasion that resulted in a change in government in Damascus. Under the League of Nations mandate, Syrian became a colony of France. The terms of the League of Nations directed that France would prepare for the eventual independence of Syria; yet, it became evident that they had no intention to do so¹⁰.

In 1921, the French divided “Greater” Lebanon. Syria was split into detached administrative units. None of these divisions worked; therefore, the French repealed their actions. For this reason, they aimed to unite the country and tried to alter its social and cultural

⁸ Çanci, Haldun, and Opeyemi Adedoyin Odukoya. “Ethnic and religious crisis in Nigeria.” ACCORD. August 29, 2016. Accessed May 12, 2018. <http://www.accord.org.za/ajcr-issues/ethnic-religious-crisis-nigeria/>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Polk, William R. “Understanding Syria: From Pre-Civil War to Post- Assad.” Global. December 13, 2013. Accessed May 13, 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/12/understanding-syria-from-pre-civil-war-to-post-assad/281989/>.

orientation. This policy implemented a common language, French. The language was aimed to promote Catholicism and better implement laws and customs.¹¹

Syrians began to develop a European style of nationalism into the 1930s. It became obvious that French policies were inefficient as nationalism shed light onto a new channel of political life. Violence became an aspect of this movement, never seen throughout the French period in this region. Throughout the coming decades, the French used martial law to force peace on the people.¹²

Again, and again Syrians were promised independence. The British invaded in 1941, because France was under the notorious Vichy administration, and overthrew the government. The Syrians were now considered “Free French.” However, it was not until April 17, 1946, that the last French soldier left.¹³

Nationalism may have proved efficient in some ways, but it was never too efficient as an organizing principle. In attempts to gain some sort of control, the Syrians placed their hope in President Nasser of Egypt and joined the United Arab Republic in 1958. The union proved inefficient, and in 1961 Syria was left to use their own resources to fix their society.

Many Syrians faced the issue of who would be considered Syrian. Most of them were Arabic-speaking Sunni Muslims. Attempting unify and find success, many people converted to Islam and began speaking Arabic. Eight out of ten Syrians saw themselves as Muslim, will another two out of ten did not. Many nationalists saw this diversity as a cause of weakness and sought to integrate those outliers. Increasing tensions, Syrians were threatened by border issues

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

with Israel. These border clashes resulted in informal fighting. Even though a ceasefire was negotiated in 1974, Israel and Syria are still legally at war.¹⁴

In 1970, the Assad regime was established. The Assad family came from Syria's minority group, Alawi, and were considered as heretics by Orthodox Muslims. Assad claimed that the Alawi should not be considered heretics, and instead Shia Muslims. Although he was able to prevent fighting from this claim, the Muslim Brotherhood was angered and the issue has remained unresolved. During the Assad regime, Syria experienced progress. However, in 2010, Syria's GDP dropped significantly due to the intense drought.¹⁵

Anti-government protests have resulted in civilian protests, which has shifted into a full on civil war. Countless Syrians have been forced out as refugees to escape the brutality of life at home. The civil war has been fought between those accepting the Assad regime, and those against it. For this reason, the fighting parties are the Sunni (majority) and the Shia Alawite (smaller, President's side). In most recent years, the jihadist group has seen a rise and has furthered this conflict.¹⁶

One of the defining features of modern democracy is liberalism. The concept of liberalism varies in concepts and arguments about economic connections and behaviors. Liberalism is founded on the argument that a person should be ensured an individual life, liberty, and property. This, it is believed, should be the highest goal of the government. In order to build

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ "Syria: The story of the conflict." BBC News. March 11, 2016. Accessed May 13, 2018. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26116868>.

a political system, the wellbeing of an individual is pertinent. Unchecked power, such as a monarchy or dictatorship, cannot ensure the rights of the individual.¹⁷

In the realm of international relations, it is troubling when foreign policies are militaristic. Not only can these strong regimes be used to fight other nations; but, they can be used to oppress its own people. In order to avoid this problem, liberal political systems tend to limit the military power. In doing so, they encourage civilians to be advocates for themselves. A concern of the liberal argument is that unaccountable violent power is a huge threat to individual liberty.¹⁸

Francis Fukuyama contends that, “the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.” Simply stated, Fukuyama believes that eventually, everyone will be democratic. Furthermore, he contends that economic interdependence is inescapable. To avoid territorial conquest during the nuclear age, economic development through trade and foreign investment is key. No longer can the world remain completely self-sufficient.

Fukuyama, like other International Relation Liberalists Theorists, state that the West is the keeper of moral truths. Progress can be observed through the elimination of global conflict because of democracy’s peaceful nature.¹⁹ A way to avoid conflict would be to accept democracy. Democracy should be emulated globally; and, for democracy to work properly, one would need a legitimacy.²⁰

¹⁷ Meiser, Jeffrey W. “Introducing Liberalism in International Relations Theory.” E-International Relations. February 18, 2018. Accessed May 14, 2018. <http://www.e-ir.info/2018/02/18/introducing-liberalism-in-international-relations-theory/>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Martínez-Tapia, Oscar. “International Liberalism.” Powerpoint, Madrid. February 26, 2018.

²⁰ Ibid.

In the case of the ethnic conflicts in Nigeria, this idea of liberalism has not been successful. In an ideal world, post-colonial Nigeria would be thriving in a democratic structure. However, there are still issues of legitimacy. One can assume that this issue of legitimacy could extend from the ethnic conflicts. Having the country divided, with different values, has been disastrous for Nigeria. Crippled by a lack of legitimacy for some has led to some dangerous groups to arise. For this reason, one can contend that International Liberalism may only be successful in places that the people are fully ready for the democracy, and the rules one needs to play to be successful.

Unfortunately for Nigeria, they were in a sense doomed from the start. Divided for the greater good of the British (since they were just seen as a colony), they were pegged against one another from the start. From an International Liberalism, this is not the end. Instead, with proper elections and de-militarization, there is hope for a much more peaceful, better future for Nigeria. Establishing legitimacy and making sure every Nigerian has a voice to vote would be essential. Proper education, so that all could vote for what they believed, not were told, is a need. As another possible solution, maybe international trade would benefit Nigerians. However, the implementation of increased international trade would have to be carefully crafted so as not to favor one ethnic groups products over another.

Syria, is in a similar boat as Nigeria. There is obviously no sense of legitimacy. Furthermore, there wasn't even much of an attempt towards democracy. International Liberalism Theory would be very hard to implement in this region because of a cultural difference for many. As Pan-Arabism was encouraged, some extremist groups have discouraged the emulation of western society. Furthermore, after French colonization, people rejected their tongue of their colonist and have encouraged the speaking of the Arabic language.

One of the largest problems going on in Syria is the rejection of the Assad regime by many. According to the liberalism theory, the fact that the regime is a regime, and not a democracy is an issue. The greatest problem though is that many people don't want Assad leading anymore because he is in the ethnic minority group. Although he was disliked for a long time by the ethnic majority, it was not until the drought that the world witnessed the extreme conditions that Syrians would endure in their ethnic war. Possibly the true horrors that have been witnessed were prevented for so long because of the progress seen during the regime; and, it wasn't until the fall of the economy that all the horrors came out.

As an International Liberalism theorists, one could contend that Nigeria and Syria need a lot of work; yet, they are not hopeless. Emulating the West, implementing democracy is essential to fixing the ethnic conflicts. Moreover, solidifying legitimacy in future politics is essential in maintaining peace. In addition, a good economy that is intertwined in the international economy would be helpful.

International Realism is the oldest theory of International Relations and politics.²¹ Even though it is one of the oldest of the theories, it is still essential when studying international affairs. Furthermore, realism is one of the most easily distinguishable voices in international political thought.²² One of the main points of this theory is that obedience to authority brings stability to a nation. Another overarching belief of this theory is that nations need to protect themselves from anarchy by having powerful militaries. Essentially, a nation would need to

²¹ Martínez-Tapia, Oscar. "International Liberalism." Powerpoint, Madrid, March 5, 2018.

²² Orsi, Davide. "The 'Clash of Civilizations' and Realism in International Political Thought." E-International Relations. April 15, 2018. Accessed May 15, 2018. <http://www.e-ir.info/2018/04/15/the-clash-of-civilizations-and-realism-in-international-political-thought/>

prepare for war by keeping peace. This theory also contends that the military is more important than a strong economy.²³

Hans Morgenthau outlined six principle of Political Realism. The first, states that politics are administered by objective laws. Secondly, interests are defined by terms of power. These means that political realism reveals politician's true behaviors. Thirdly, state power determines political, cultural, and strategic environment. Next, universal moral codes do not guide state power. The next point is that it is not possible for everyone to agree on moral principles. Lastly, in the political sphere, every state can act independently.²⁴

Political theorists have pinpointed several problems with this theory, that include: intellectual legitimation for immoral behavior, it is too simplistic, focuses too much on just one state, no respect for international law, too determined, and rejection of logic.²⁵ This is a very conservative belief that rejects the logic of change. Instead, the theory focuses on the civilians to trust in their leaders.

According to Huntington, "states are the primary, indeed, the only important actors in world affairs, the relations among states is one of anarchy, and hence, to ensure their survival and security, states invariably attempt to maximize their power." Huntington defends the importance of states. They are a collection of characteristics in a culture, that include: language, religion, customs, self-identification of people, and so much more. For this reason, states help people identify²⁶ and attribute meaning to their government.

²³ Martínez-Tapia, Oscar. "International Liberalism." Powerpoint, Madrid, March 5, 2018.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Martínez-Tapia, Oscar. "Realism." Powerpoint, Madrid. March 7, 2018.

²⁶ Orsi, Davide. "The 'Clash of Civilizations' and Realism in International Political Thought." E-International Relations. April 15, 2018. Accessed May 15, 2018. <http://www.e-ir.info/2018/04/15/the-clash-of-civilizations-and-realism-in-international-political-thought/>.

Nigeria and its ethnic conflicts would be regarded by the realism perspective as just a product of society. War is inevitable because society is anarchical.²⁷ However, the ethnic conflict could have been avoided if people were more obedient to authority. If they had been obedient, Nigeria would have stability. The people should have no public opinion because their politicians know best for them.²⁸

The same essentially rings true for Syria. There would be no need to question the legitimacy of the Assad regime because the politicians were obliged to look out in the best interest of its citizens. According to this theory, even though the economic crash led to the final breakout of a civil war, a stronger military would have been more efficient to the Syrian people. Moreover, those questioning the Assad regime based on religious principles should never have done so because there could never be any possible moral principle that could be agreed upon.

The realism theory is a bit hard to apply to such complex ethnic conflicts. In the studies of Nigeria and Syria, there needs to be a different, more complex theory applied. The realism theory is outdated and cannot be applied to such multifaceted issues that exist. For this reason, the liberalism theory is a bit better in thinking of an issue for this solution. The liberalist assumption is that a fruitful economy can stabilize; and, the case studies of Nigeria and Syria prove this aspect. Furthermore, establishing legitimacy could greatly benefit these nations.

However, neither can be used to fully explain what has happened to allow people to turn on one another. Additionally, as E.H. Carr stated, it is dangerous to base International Relations on how the world ought to be.²⁹ Both theories are far too western oriented to be applied to these nations. In the situation of post-colonial states experiencing ethnic conflict, neither International

²⁷ Martínez-Tapia, Oscar. "Realism." Powerpoint, Madrid. March 5, 2018.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Martínez-Tapia, Oscar. "Realism." Powerpoint, Madrid. March 5, 2018.

Liberalism Theory, nor International Realism Theory can produce a proper explanation, nor a possible solution. To have humans allow children to die because of a difference in faith cannot be simply attributed to a lack of legitimacy nor a failing economy.

Instead, one can look to their shared history. Both nations were not nations to start with. In place of this western construct, “Nigerians” and “Syrians” lived for centuries in tribal systems. Their governments were legitimate because they had been in place by their ancestors. Their economies were dependent upon trade and bartering. Quite possibly the greatest similarity these nations share is that they were meshed with people they had never intended to be joint with. Their colonizers utilized this and created divides in Nigeria and Syria so that they could be better controlled. Equally, these states were left to question what their nationalism would mean as they pieced together what would be a nation.

Through the examination of the histories of Nigeria and Syria, one can better understand where these ethnic conflicts arose from. By understanding the International Liberalism Theory, one can theorize about possible solutions for these atrocious conflicts. Moreover, by studying the International Realism Theory, one can see the development of International Relations Theories. Through the study of both theories, one can create their own solution for ethnic conflicts that are affecting much of the world. Although neither International Liberalization Theory and Realism Theory do not create a solution to these conflicts, they allow one to theorize on their own about possible solutions.

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