Review of: "The Failure of Diplomatic Mediations in the Syrian Conflict – A Comparative Analysis"

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

A through and useful application of the rational-instrumental approach

This work applies a well-known rational-instrumental approach in assessing the failure of diplomacy in Syria. It uses a comparison of three different noble, credible, diplomatic efforts, to offer students an effective review of the realist approach employed by I. W. Zartman and S. Touval. The author concludes on p. 19, that these efforts failed due to the number of parties involved, which raised the complexity of the conflict. The added international dimension--as Syria became the battleground for the competing interests of Iran, Russia, Turkey, the Gulf States, and the United States-- obviously impedes efforts to find a rational compromise, such as the distribution of gains according to the proportion of battlefield capability. The rational-instrumental approach argues that the domestic protestors should never have resisted a government which has the support of Russia and Iran, because any struggle would be hopeless. In the third paragraph of the conclusion, the author notes that factors left untouched by the three assessed negotiation efforts may have contributed to the failure of those efforts. The author specifically notes "root causes" and "psychological drivers." This hints at the other two competing theoretical perspectives on conflict and conflict resolution: the grievance, or basic human needs approach; and the constructivist, or framing approach. However, conflict analysis according to these two approaches requires a greater degree of knowledge of the specific character of the situation and cultural issues—factors commonly less regarded in the rational-instrumental approach. A fuller examination of the prospects for a negotiated settlement in Syria would employ all three perspectives.

As an example of where this analysis needs a little more specificity, consider the simplistic statement: "the Alawites, a sect of Shia Islam." The decision to call the Alawites a part of the Shi'a community reflects the political decisions in Iran and Syria to justify an alliance rooted in a shared perception of threat and potential for mutual aid. In 1963, Ayatollah Hasan Mehdi al-Shirazi accepted the Alawites as Shi'a, and in 1973, the head of the Lebanese Shi'a Supreme Council, Imam Musa al-Sadr, issued a fatwa calling the Alawites a legitimate part of Shia Islam. [Nadia von Maltzahn, *The Syria Iran Axis: Cultural Diplomacy and International Relations in the Middle East*. New York: I. B. Tauris, 2013: 23] This does not reflect the historical perception of either party toward the other.

In sum, this work presents a credible application and assessment of the factors cited in a well-known, rational-instrumental approach toward negotiated settlements. I would recommend it as an example for classroom discussion. It shows a strong understanding of the perspective employed.