

Opponent Review

For: Bc. Martin Bureš

Thesis: Activity of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in the context of the Syrian Civil War

The author has chosen as the topic of his work the OPCW activities in the case of the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian civil war by the Assad regime. The topic is relevant and could have provided a closer understanding of how international organizations address an international problem. However, the thesis presented here shows significant reserves in this regard.

In the first place, I consider that the submitted thesis does not deal with the chosen topic in depth. In the introduction, the author states that he will focus on the building of the Syrian chemical weapons arsenal itself, including political and legal aspects, and assess the role of important state and non-state actors and organisations. Unfortunately, the author has failed to elaborate on these aspects in depth and, in particular, the work of the OPCW is treated very superficially.

The work is theoretically grounded in the key theories of international relations: realism, liberalism, constructivism and critical theories. I value the fact that the author has included critical theories such as feminism and pacifism, which are hardly encountered in theses. The author has also tried to expand the theoretical part, which is reflected in its greater scope. On the other hand, the elaboration corresponds to the overall spirit of the thesis - "a little of everything, but nothing in depth". Each theory has its own premises through which it looks at international relations, their actors, processes and outcomes (e.g. international agreements, etc.). When dealing with an international issue, which chemical disarmament certainly is (here specifically in the case of Syria), careful thought must be given to what premises will be useful to the thesis and contribute to answering the research questions. In this thesis, I think that the author did not choose the best approach so that the theoretical background will help him in solving the case study. The student has basically described the elements of the problem such as WMD, deterrence or disarmament in terms of the theoretical approaches chosen. However, the OPCW was identified as the main topic, but the author hardly reflects the emergence and activities of international organizations/regimes or the motivation of actors to enter into international agreements. It is also noticeable that the author inclines towards realist theory, which is fine. Thus, he could have elaborated it more in terms of the actors (e.g. to explain the reasons why Syria was building a chemical weapons arsenal or to explain the reactions of key world powers), but also the obstacles to the activities of international organisations like the OPCW.

The case study is very short (second and third chapters) and again there is a problem with the targeting of the content. It is certainly important to put the topic in the context, but on the other hand the context should not overwhelm the main topic. I would have expected a more in-depth analysis of the creation and building of the Syrian chemical arsenal and an analysis of the Syrian approach to international agreements. The key third chapter on OPCW activities is only five and a bit pages long and very descriptive.

In terms of linking the theoretical framework and the case study, it can be appreciated that the author has made an effort to link the theoretical approaches with the case study, but it is evident that this linking is not consistent, it is rather random and unfortunately sketchy. As I wrote, the author tends more towards realist theory, which could have been developed more in the theoretical part and then applied to the case study.

As far as the sources are concerned, the author based his work on foreign and Czech academic publications and internet sources. In terms of the quantity of sources, I believe that the number of sources used is sufficient. On the other hand, I have doubts about the extent to which the author has carried out research on the topic. For example, the passage in the introduction concerning the sources used is very short. Indeed, there is a wealth of information on the Syrian conflict and it is possible that it may have been a problem for the author to search so many sources for those directly relevant to the topic. Unfortunately, it is Syria's chemical program itself and the activities of the OPCW that remain very much on the surface.

The author cites sufficiently in the thesis, but the use of the PF UPOL citation standard is inconsistent. The linguistic form of the thesis is acceptable, but the coherence of the text is sometimes lacking.

My overall criticism of the thesis is that the author did not target the topic stated in the title of the thesis and outlined in the introduction. Furthermore, the level of elaboration is rather descriptive and does not go into depth. The author himself admits that the weakest aspect of his work is its descriptiveness. However, it escapes me why he has not tried to change his approach. Alternatively, if he is aware of the descriptiveness, at least he could have gone in depth and brought in information beyond what is generally known. The chosen topic of the thesis certainly allowed for that.

Despite the above criticisms, I believe that the submitted thesis meets the criteria set for this type of university thesis and I rate it with a grade of E.

In Olomouc, 22. 2. 2023

Mgr. Petra Měšťánková, Ph.D.

Questions:

1. How does realist theory approach the formation and functioning of international organizations/regimes?

Evaluation Master Thesis

Name student	Martin Bures	
Title of Thesis	Activity of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in the context of the Syrian Civil War	
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Date	20.02.2023	
Evaluation		
Statement of problem/ research question		Satisfactory (3)
Outline and Structure		Satisfactory (3)
Explanation of Concepts and Terminology		Sufficient (4)
Coverage of literature (relevance and extent) and Citation		Satisfactory (3)
Critical analysis and application of theoretic approaches/ Methodology		Sufficient (4)
Language (Grammar, Orthography, linguistic expression)		Satisfactory (3)
Comments		
<p>The thesis tackles one of the longest ongoing conflicts in the European Neighbourhood, the Syrian Civil War. It is also the conflict, which probably, still before the war in Ukraine, had shown the deep ruptures in the international community and the fragility of a liberal world order, which builds on the functioning of international institutions. However, the Syrian war has also presented us with a puzzle: at the height of the war – and even shortly after it had been accused of using chemical weapons against its own population – the Syrian government under President Assad decides to ratify the “Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on their Destruction”. What might seem even more puzzling in this context is, that it does so, after the Un Security Council has repeatedly failed to punish Syrian authorities for its human rights violations and the use of force and heavy weapons against civilians, because of vetoes by Russia (often supported by China).</p> <p>Unfortunately, this puzzle is not spelled out in the thesis. The thesis formulates three questions (which theory of international relations explains disarmament best, why did Syria have chemical weapons at all and how did it go with disarmament?), but why these questions are relevant, is not addressed at all. The author himself cautions us on page 7 that the thesis is descriptive, due to its research design; but why then is the research design not adapted accordingly to add some explanatory value to the thesis? The research design itself is confusing: what is the aim of the thesis? Is the aim to describe/ explain why Syria ratified the CWC at this specific point in time? Is it to show that despite the ratification of the Convention the disarmament process did not proceed as expected and provide explanations for this? Or is the aim “theory testing” in a broader sense, to show which theory best explains Syrian behaviour on the issue? The research questions do not contribute to a clearer focus of the thesis and in the following the thesis seems to try “a bit of everything”.</p>		

This lack of focus continues with the selection of theoretic approaches. Mr Bures discusses realism, liberalism, constructivism, feminism, just war theory and pacifism, but why exactly these theories are selected remains unclear. Why feminism? Why not institutionalism?

In addition, the explanation of each theory is very rough (and sometimes incorrect), differences between theories are not clearly explained (and it seems not fully comprehended) and no hypotheses are formulated, which would have allowed an analytical approach towards the case of Syria. From a realist perspective: under which conditions would we expect a change of the Syrian stance on the Chemical weapons convention? Syria obviously is not a "big power" in the anarchic game of international society. But it is part of a bigger game which is played between the "Western World" and its contenders, in particular Russia. While Russia "protected" the Assad regime in the UN Security Council, it had other interests as well, namely proving that the international community had to rely on Russia for solving conflict. Russia thus "allowed" the diplomatic breakthrough concerning the destruction of the Syrian chemical weapons stockpile and even acted as guarantor (but in the future again blocked resolutions against Syria, also concerning the reports of the Joint Investigative Mechanism). From a realist perspective we have to consider state preferences (states are regarded as black boxes), absolute and relative power gains. From a liberal perspective the focus would be on international norms, institutions and the normative pressure emerging from these international rules. Constructivism on the other hand is not so much about different aspects of anarchy, but how states build their identity in an international system, how they interpret their position, their room of manoeuvre, the sense they make of particular events – there is no objective reality of international relations, but a constant meaning-making by state actors. Again, we need a different focus on events and a different explanatory path. The focus would shift to the narratives on the events concerning the use of chemical weapons in Syria, the reasons provided for the ratification of the CWC, but also the different narratives on the fulfilment (or non-fulfilment) of requirements. But as already the outline of theories is very rough, and it is neither specified what exactly has to be analysed to confirm or refute the explanatory power of the different theoretic approaches on the specific case of Syria and its ratification (and non-implementation) of the CWC, nor which data is exactly analysed, the results are anecdotal and erratic and not the results of a systematic analysis. This hinders the development of a coherent argument and does not allow for a comparative analysis of theories, nor does it contribute to a consistent analysis of the Syrian case of Chemical Weapons disarmament.

One consequence of the shortcomings of the theoretic part is, that there is in essence no "empirical" part of the thesis. As the theoretic part does not provide a consistent framework for analysis, it is unclear which data has to be used for a meaningful comparative analysis. For the chapter on chemical weapons disarmament the thesis draws on OPCW reports and papers, which provides an interesting glance at the findings on Syria.

The thesis mainly draws on literature on nuclear weapons or weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in general. While this is logical, considering the similarities of political dynamics, the importance of control mechanisms and the existence of international agreements, the

explanation of the concept "WMD" remains incomplete. It ventures into a debate whether biological and chemical weapons are actually to be considered WMD, but does not develop a consistent explanation. Here reference to the definition of the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs could have been helpful, which considers nuclear, biological and chemical weapons as WMD and in its area of action (<https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/>).

The style of language makes the thesis in parts difficult to read. It often seems repetitive, sometimes losing the focus of the argument and at times over-simplistic and does not fully meet academic standards. The thesis is rather short (with 44 pages more the size of a seminar paper). A list of abbreviations is missing.

Questions	What would be the main differences in research design when testing liberal and realist approaches to the Syrian case? What are the core assumptions of liberal theories on international relation and how to they differ from constructivist approaches?
Overall Grade	Satisfactory (3)

