Libya Was Easy

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RODGER SHANAHAN, MAR 22 2012

Libya was easy, but Syria is hard. It has been said before, but the question this time is whether the architects of R2P, or more precisely the proponents of the principle, envisaged both types of scenarios when they came up with the concept. The experience of the original architects would lead one to believe that they were fully aware of its limitations. The problem is though, that the practical difficulties were never enunciated clearly enough at the time. Or that people were not listening when they were. Most international relations practitioners with any practical experience realize that the real world is messy. The real world rarely deals in absolutes, so that *realpolitik* normally triumphs over principle.

Syria encapsulates all of the difficulties inherent in trying to apply a good, even noble theoretical construct to real world problems. Too often R2P is taken to mean the use of force to protect the civilian population, but it has always involved a graduated response, involving diplomatic and economic sanctions to isolate the offending government, with the threat of force considered as a last resort. And if it is difficult enough to gain consensus concerning decisions to undertake the first two methods of applying pressure to governments, the use of force is even more difficult. Part of the reticence in undertaking military action is naturally because of the understanding that people will be killed, even it is in defence of a principle worth defending.

But as we have seen recently, there are somewhat more pragmatic reasons as well. While international military force sounds like a compelling tool that can be used by the world to enforce the writ of UN Security Council Resolutionss, we must be under no illusion that there is any guarantee such force options will achieve the politico-humanitarian objectives that have been set for them. For a start, use of force that does not involve the United States in some capacity is unlikely to be effective except against governments with negligible, or very limited military capabilities. Even the Libyan experiment showed how difficult military campaigns involving only the use of airpower are to prosecute. The Libyan military had a very limited capability, the terrain was extremely favourable to an aerial campaign and the international community was united in its resolve. And it still took seven months to successfully prosecute the intervention. In Syria none of the conditions present for the Libyan intervention exist.

The United States has already pointed out the difficulties of intervening militarily in Syria. Aerial campaign? The Syrian forces have a sophisticated Russian-supplied air defence system that would need to be neutralized before any air campaign could even commence. Civilian safe havens? There are no natural geographic features that lend themselves to the establishment of such havens. To set up defensible safe havens would take a significant commitment of ground forces, which no one is willing to do. And safe havens may have the unintended consequence of establishing sectarian enclaves where none existed before. Arm the Free Syrian Army? As the commander of US Central Command, General Mattis remarked during a recent Senate Armed Services Committee meeting, the first consideration in these situations needed to be for the US to 'do no harm'. There are many doubts about the FSA (Free Syrian Army) – how centrally controlled it is, the influence of Salafists within it, the attitudes of its nearly exclusively Sunni fighters to other religious minorities. The recent Human Rights Watch criticism of torture and extra-judicial killings amongst some of its members have done nothing to reinforce anybody's opinion that it is a well disciplined group of freedom fighters. Those who wish to supply it with weapons need to be absolutely confident that those weapons do not find their way into the wrong groups' hands, or are used to kill non-combatants. To do otherwise would be worse than negligent.

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Written by Rodger Shanahan

At the same time, the Syrian opposition do not currently present as a viable alternative to the Assad regime, nor do they appear likely to develop that way in the immediate future. They are disunited, and stand accused by some as being as non-representative of the broader Syrian population as the Assad regime, although in completely different sectarian ways. And most importantly, there is the issue of international unity on the issue. As long as Russia and China (or even one of them) are unwilling to countenance UN-sanctioned action against the Assad regime, the use of force is taken out of the calculation.

Gareth Evans, one of the prime architects of the concept, has noted the backlash by the BRIC states over the way in which they felt that the coercive force element of R2P was applied in the case of Libya. He has also identified that UNSC agreement to any future use of force under the R2P rubric will be impossible to achieve unless the issues of concern arising out of the Libyan intervention are successfully addressed. But the Russian stance over Syria is much more than its annoyance over the way that the air campaign evolved from the defence of Benghazi to close air support for a rebel advance on Tripoli. That was an issue of concern certainly, but Russia's reluctance to back action against Damascus is much more about its own national interests. Moscow sees little upside in the Arab Spring for its regional policy. The fall of Ghaddafi has cost it billions of dollars in future arms exports, and the fall of Assad would be equally deleterious in purely commercial terms. But Assad also represents Russia's only Arab ally, and provides it with a naval support base that allows it to project naval power in the Mediterranean. His fall would represent a significant blow to Russian economic, security and political interests, as well as its own sense of national pride.

For other regional countries, the survival of the Assad regime is necessary for their own regional ambitions. Iran, while mouthing platitudes about needing to listen to the demands of the Syrian people, has also been providing support to the Ba'thists. The detachment of Syria from its ally in Tehran would be a significant blow to Iran, and one that it wishes to avoid if at all possible. For others, while there is condemnation of the actions of the Syrian government against its citizens, there is also a (unstated) desire for stability in Damascus for both economic reasons and a sense that any form of government sympathetic to Islamist interests may eventually have negative consequences for its own interests down the track. Jordan, for example, receives 70% of its imports through Syria and the majority of its exports go the same route to Europe. Lebanon and Iraq have their own political, as well as commercial reasons for favouring an ongoing Assad-led government than a Sunni-dominated alternative.

The key element of R2P that appears to have been forgotten in the self-congratulatory atmosphere generated by the apparent success of military intervention in Libya is that the concept is much more about preventive diplomacy than the use of force. Internal conflicts, particularly those of a sectarian or ethnic nature, are nearly always the most vicious and intractable of wars. The use of force against the regime in power in these circumstances, if not employed adroitly, can have unintended second and third order effects that may result in a worse situation than that originally faced. Just as the guiding principle of 'do no harm' applies to the provision of humanitarian assistance, so too does it apply equally to decisions to invoke R2P as a justification for military intervention. And in Syria, it is difficult to see how the military dimension of R2P would not breach that principle. Libya was really easy.

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Dr Rodger Shanahan *is a former army officer and diplomat with extensive experience in the Middle East, and is now a non-resident fellow at the Lowy Institute for International Policy.*