

## Review - Can Intervention Work?

Written by Chris McCarthy

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CHRIS MCCARTHY, JUL 9 2012

Can Intervention Work?

by Rory Stewart and Gerald Knaus

W. W. Norton and Co. 2011

The military campaign in Bosnia in the 1990s was supposedly a turning point in the debate over humanitarian intervention. The humiliating withdrawal of US soldiers from Somalia, which contributed to the failure to prevent genocide in Rwanda in 1994, had shaken faith in the idea that external nations could bring an effective end to intra-state violence. Bosnia held out the vision of a 'good intervention.' Fifteen years later and the debate has come full-circle. Following the protracted and messy interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, the appetite for similar action elsewhere had supposedly been exhausted. The NATO campaign in Libya revived the prospect of successful interventions.

This background, coupled with their personal experience, provides the context in which Rory Stewart and Gerald Knaus ask: *Can Intervention Work?* They are not interested in the moral or ethical considerations of interventions but "whether and how to intervene in a particular at a particular time." (xiii) As Syria descends into civil war, the question of what makes interventions work and fail is a timely one.

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The book is divided into two essays and is prefaced with a co-written introduction: "One essay explains how we got interventions right; the other, why we so often get intervention wrong." (xvi) The first essay is by Stewart who, before becoming a Conservative MP, served as a deputy governor of two Iraqi provinces and wrote a book about his time walking across Afghanistan solo in early 2002. His portrayal of the country and why the international community got it so wrong is a depressingly familiar one.

Isolated from Afghan life in heavy fortified camps and by career structures that favoured administrative competence over language skills, well-intentioned international policy-makers were always much weaker than they imagined. All this contributed to what former US Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara described in Vietnam as: "Our profound ignorance of the history, culture, and politics of the people in the area, and the personalities and habits of their leaders." (p13)

This was, in Stewart's view, the central cause of the humiliating mess in Afghanistan and the problem was compounded by officials – whether diplomats, UN staff, or military captains – serving very short tours. Such lack of continuity impeded the development of relationships with Afghan leaders and Stewart is not shy in pointing figures. Sir Michael Jay, who as the head of UK Foreign Office in 2001 deliberately reduced weight previously given to knowledge of languages and geographical areas in favour of administrative skills, comes in for particularly strong criticism. In 2009, according to the FCO's own assessment, the British required no Pashto speakers to work effectively in Afghanistan, even though it was the language of Helmand, where the British was fighting. (p16)

Stewart is not against the principle of intervention *per se*, but along with his co-author cautions against lofty expectations: "We – the foreign government organizations and their partners – know much less and can do much less than we pretend." (p71) The goals in Afghanistan – which Stewart laments were poorly defined and frequently shifting – needed to be set at a more modest and attainable level. Aspirations of 'counter-insurgency' or 'state-building' were doomed from the start; the international community failed to appreciate how poor, fragile and traumatized Afghanistan was. (p71) It was for the same reasons that Stewart was a particularly vociferous critic of the 'surge strategy' arguing that what was needed instead was a light long-term footprint.

Ultimately what undermined the intervention in Afghanistan, argues Stewart, was not a lack of resources, or commitment, or 'boots on the ground'. The problem was in the international community's ignorance of local conditions and Afghan culture. Both authors are reluctant to propose any 'general principles of intervention' – each must be considered on their individual merits – but Stewart proposes that the best thing we can do in the long term is to build a corps of more experienced guides for foreign policy: people who are absorbed in the political reality of a particular country. (79) Better-informed staff do not guarantee success but they are an important part of helping to reduce the chance of failure

In the second half of the book, Knaus, a founding chairman of the European Stability Initiative, examines the intervention in Bosnia. Broadly hailed as a 'success' the campaign contributed to the rise of the dominant liberal imperialist vision of the early twenty-first century: "If the United States and its allies only wanted it badly enough, they could end atrocities, overthrow hostile regimes, rebuild states, introduce democracy and impose the rule of law." (p100)

Knaus criticises this approach, along with the 'planning school' of nation building that proposes universal lessons of intervention can be applied to future campaigns, for inflating the prospects of international agents to affect change at a local level. The models of international planners rest on a mistaken view of the 'international community' and its interaction with local society: foreigners who comprise the international community are "usually much weaker than they imagine." (pxix)

This does not mean that the only viable alternative is to argue that both humanitarian intervention and nation-building are generally bound to fail; the so-called "futility" school. (p128) There is a fourth-way that involves "muddling through with a sense of purpose" (188) in what Knaus calls *principled incrementalism*. (p129) When getting involved in complex post-conflict environments, the international community often lacks both the knowledge and authority to prepare and implement a plan for meaningful social change. That does not mean they cannot achieve some success

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if they build alliances with local actors; International policy-makers often “underestimate the intelligence and competence of local politicians and overlook their ability to compromise with their armed opponents.” (xxi)

Both authors stress the importance for any successful intervention of working with local officials, not only to better understand conditions on the ground and local norms but also to help legitimise their presence. Sustained interventions, or what Gary Bass described as a state of “permanent emergency” (p188) often prevents local leaders from taking responsibility and can actually strength the popularity of insurgents. (pxxi)

Knaus and Stewart ultimately hedge their bets when it comes to answering their own question. The international community is capable of stopping mass atrocities, as the Balkans shows, but it must tread carefully, adopting an incremental approach burnished by local knowledge and expertise. Can intervention work? Sometimes. It is not the greatest confidence-booster when one looks at Syria today.

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