

Reflecting on 9/11

Written by Robert W. Murray

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ROBERT W. MURRAY, SEP 12 2012

It should come as no surprise that a blog entry this week would focus on the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. I spent most of the day on Sept. 11 this year trying to keep track of what was being said on popular IR blogs, websites, Twitter, Facebook and in the media because of 9/11's profound place in the field. Though many have spent their efforts discussing just how impactful the terrorist attacks on that fateful day were, and subsequent events, a few things continually strike me about how scholars view 9/11.

Perhaps the biggest thing that struck me about this year's anniversary was the sheer number of articles or commentaries that related the events of Sept. 11 to the human security agenda. It could have been sheer coincidence, but even in the lead up to the anniversary, many outlets (including e-IR) published stories about human security, humanitarian intervention and about the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine. One argument hit me the hardest by saying that because of 9/11, the world is far more open to acting in the name of humanity because the attacks on the United States altered the security policies of states from state-centric to human-centric. This is not the first utterance of this line of argument I have seen, but it becomes less and less appetizing over time.

It is obvious that state security calculations needed to change after 9/11, as the world saw how the systemic hegemon could be attacked and affected by non-state actors. However, this is a far cry from a divinely inspired turn towards human security. Since its initial articulations just prior to 9/11, R2P has become a purely academic exercise for scholars and some UN policy-makers who support its normative framework. Reality tells a different story, in that the UN itself butchered the tenets of R2P in 2005 by turning it into a doctrine that reaffirmed existing international law – not very original. Further, the UN has never used R2P operationally, and yes, that includes Libya in 2011. Resolution 1973 may have involved the protection of civilians, but this was hardly R2P at work.

Continuing the discussion on interventionism, it is true that 9/11 led to a proliferation of intellectual debate about the virtues of peacebuilding. The NATO mission in Afghanistan, the ill-conceived US and UK mission in Iraq, and then into the 2011 deployment in Libya have led to the belief that military missions should and can be carried out regularly in an effort to force regime change and foster democratic norms. The response to 9/11 was state-to-state, with the US and its allies targeting Afghanistan as the primary state culprit responsible for sponsoring the attacks and harbouring terrorists. As such, a NATO mission began in late 2001 and is still going on today. In Iraq, the 'Coalition of the Willing' launched its offensive in 2003, and in the Libya case, the UN and eventually NATO conducted operations throughout 2011. In each of these 3 cases, the political regimes that existed prior to intervention were overthrown in relatively short order, and new regimes are in place. A new regime, though, does not a democracy make.

After 11 years, Afghanistan is not at all a stable nation, politically, economically or militarily. Attacks are still carried out on remaining NATO forces who occupy large areas of the country. Iraq is marginally better, though is by no means a functioning democracy. Libya is showing signs of political collapse and confusion, most clearly evidenced by the US Ambassador to Libya being killed in a rocket attack trying to flee the crowds rushing the embassy. Peacebuilding is in no way a logical, rational or positive strategy. The mere thought that by overthrowing a regime, a nation or international organization can create a new political culture to its liking is borderline surreal. One element constantly lost in peacebuilding discussions is the value of the soldiers put in the line of fire. Why have intervention advocates become so good at putting the lives of 'civilians' above their own soldiers? Soldiers willingly put their lives

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on the line, but they should be granted the courtesy of clear mission goals, an understanding of who and why they are fighting, and a timeline for completion. Rotating soldiers on decades-long missions with no end in sight and for no good reason is, in my opinion, a violation of soldiers' human rights.

Lastly, the field of IR itself has undergone drastic change since 9/11. Studies of terrorism have grown exponentially, as have debates about neocolonialism, xenoracism and non-state actors. Again, we have seen the transition from the 'international' to the 'global'. Yet, I urge caution to those who consistently try to proclaim the death of the state, or states in general. The global is very evident, but states remain the key actors in both international and global politics. Even for those trying to see the mirage of R2P, states (or in some cases, mentions of an abstract international community) are still required to actually carry out missions in humanitarian crisis.

Much has changed since 9/11, but we need to remain tempered in our analyses of how the world works. On such a somber anniversary, bear in mind those innocent victims who lost their lives on Sept. 11, but also reflect on the much larger numbers of civilians and soldiers that have perished in the reactions to it.

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Read more from Robert W. Murray's e-IR blog: [Power, Security and Self-Help: A Blog of International Reality](#).

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