

Why Has R2P Not Been Applied to Syria?

Written by Filippos Aligizakis

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Why Has The Responsibility to Protect Principle Not Been Applied to Syria?

With a bloody civil war raging in the country for more than two years and a growing death toll, there are many who wonder why has there not been a humanitarian intervention in Syria under the umbrella of the Responsibility to Protect^[1] doctrine. Therefore, in this essay, I am going to tackle this question and analyse firstly whether the Syrian situation indeed warrants the application of this doctrine, and secondly, if it does, what reasons have kept it from being enforced. Thus, I will conclude that the Syrian bloodshed certainly presents a valid case of R2P; however, strong objections from some countries in the international community, coupled with a general anti-interventionist feeling, have prevented the application of the doctrine in Syria.

To begin with, it is fundamental that we first understand the key principle at hand, the doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect, which was an initiative of the United Nations established on the 2009 World Summit (United Nations, n.a.). R2P came into fruition after a series of poorly executed and highly criticised UN-led relief missions in the last decade of the 20th century, which often resulted in an alarming death toll and little success or relief for the affected people (Evans & Sahnoun, 2002). The ambitious new principle of R2P was divided into three distinct parts; firstly, that it was each state's primary responsibility to protect their populations against the commitment and incitement of the "four crimes of genocide," which included genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity (Bellamy, 2010). Furthermore, the international community itself had a responsibility to assist a state trying to enforce the R2P, and, most importantly, "if a State is manifestly failing to protect its populations, the international community must be prepared to take collective action to protect populations, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations" (United Nations, n.a.). Consequently, this rather controversial new policy was the first instance of the absolute power of state sovereignty called into question, as there was a shared belief that states sometimes used their sovereign right to carry out unlawful and hostile practises against their populations, and thus sovereignty was used as a "license to kill" (Yale University, 2011).[2]

For the first time, the United Nations firmly set the framework for a de-facto plan and guidelines which directly dealt with cases of genocide and major human rights violations, while, even more importantly, the R2P principle represented a radical shift in the conduct of international affairs as it became the liberal answer to the traditional realist doctrine of the 'right to intervene', which was often cited by many powers as a legitimate basis for their hostile and forced involvements in other states (Trifkovic, 2008). Thus, political leaders ranging from the Soviet President Brezhnev to American leaders such as Clinton and George W. Bush had frequently initiated policies based on their countries' absolute right to intervene in another state, effectively disregarding that said country's sovereignty. Consequently, whether it was socialist countries which "cannot be opposed to the interests of the socialist world", Western countries "defending the values that give NATO^[3] meaning", or finally the US which would not "hesitate to act alone" in order to exercise its right of self-defence, there have always been plenty of reasons and titles given to policies of intervention (Trifkovic, 2008). Therefore, the Responsibility to Protect doctrine aimed to change this seemingly unjust international landscape by introducing a collective decision-making rather than allowing one country to unilaterally intervene in another country's internal affairs without any prior consultation or approval from the international community. It is important to note that the new doctrine presented a variety of suggested solutions,

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leaving military intervention as the very last step, while it was also heavily centered on the idea of responsibility; first the responsibility of the state to protect its own citizens, and then the collective responsibility of the wider international community to protect these individuals if their own state fails to do so (Evans, 2011). Finally, the R2P doctrine also symbolised a major change in the language of international relations, as there was no longer the concept of forceful intervention, but rather the constructive and peaceful idea of protection (Evans, 2011).

After having analysed the R2P principle, we then have to consider whether this doctrine is applicable to the Syrian situation, where since March 2011 there has been a violent uprising against the ruling government, which has escalated into a full-blown civil war, claiming the lives of more than 70,000 Syrian citizens (The Associated Press, 2013). International organizations and countries have staunchly condemned the regime of President Bashar al-Assad for carrying out what has been described as a “war of extermination” and genocide against his own people and subjects (CNN Wire Staff, 2012). Thus, according to a 2012 report from Amnesty International, Syrian government forces and militia have been “rampaging through towns and villages” setting houses on fire and indiscriminately killing people of all ages (International, 2012). As the civil war has intensified so has the brutality of the regime, with government forces destroying everything from homes to medical facilities; torturing prisoners, often to death; denying the injured from life-saving medical treatment; and finally shooting and killing anyone suspected of aiding the opposition, including many innocent people (International, 2012). In their scathing report, Amnesty International concluded that the “deliberate and unlawful killings are part of a widespread and systematic attack against the civilian population, carried out in an organised manner and as part of state policy” and therefore clearly constitute crimes against humanity (International, 2012). The UN itself agrees with this report as, according to its own investigations, it has found that the regime has committed a growing number of “gross violations of human rights”, coupled with war crimes and crimes against humanity (Anon., 2012).[4] Thus, since it is clear that grave human rights injustices are being committed in Syria, why has there not been an intervention by the international community?

Unfortunately, we cannot attribute this lack of action to one single reason or country. To begin with, there has been a failure of the United Nations to pass a strong resolution against Assad as diplomatic efforts have been torpedoed by Syria’s main allies, Russia and China. Thus, two separate punitive Security Council resolutions calling for an end to the regime’s brutal repression of the uprising, and ordering Assad’s troops to move out from heavily populated areas or face sanctions, were vetoed by the two permanent members, effectively tying the hands of the UN and leaving Assad’s regime free to proceed virtually undisturbed (The Wall Street Journal, 2012). Consequently, it is evident that the Syrian regime has been given an important lifeline from its allies, a move which should not come as a surprise considering the vital Russian interests in maintaining Assad in power, as not only does the Syrian regime provide Russia with its only Mediterranean naval base but their lucrative economic agreements are worth almost 20 billion (Mansur, 2012). However, another significant reason for this general inaction towards Syria is that contrary to past crises, such as Libya in 2011, Western powers have surprisingly gone “to enormous lengths to avoid getting dragged into a military conflict in Syria” (Gardner, 2012). This could be attributed to a number of reasons, and especially to a great concern about who would takeover after Assad, as there is a strong likelihood of Syria turning into a sectarian Islamist state, a nightmare scenario for the Western powers. In the words of scholar Abraham Wagner, the general feeling echoed within the international community is that “yes, Assad is not a good guy, but the alternative may be worse” (Gelling & Shelton, 2013). Also, despite some voices calling for a military intervention against Assad, the majority of countries are trying to avoid just that, as it would not only go against international and regional public opinion, but would also pose a major challenge since Assad’s regime still maintains some of its former strength.

Thus, contrary to Libya, where Western forces were met with a disorganised and poorly equipped army, the Syrian army forces are powerful and well-trained, while they also possess an effective air defense system, weakening the chances of a NATO-enforced no-fly zone (Mansur, 2012). Furthermore, NATO itself has “categorically” ruled out any possibility of a military intervention, as in the opinion of its Secretary-General, “Syria is ethnically, politically, religiously much more complicated than Libya” (Masters, 2013). Despite imposing some economic sanctions, the United States also wants to avoid a military conflict with Syria as not only would this require a large ground force and a potential long-term occupation of the country,[5] but could also possibly lead to a military intervention from Iran, a disastrous development that would cause worldwide instability and chaos. In conclusion, it should be noted that diplomatic contacts with foreign governments have only recently been established as regrettably there was not a unified opposition with which Western powers could negotiate prior to November 2012 (Masters, 2013).

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Consequently, it can be seen that the international community is facing a major challenge in Syria, one which does not seem to have an easy and painless solution. In theory, the Syrian situation is a typical case which warrants the application of the R2P doctrine as there is an ongoing government campaign of extermination against civilians amidst a bloody and ruthless civil war. However, the UN has been rendered virtually powerless, with Russia and China repeatedly blocking any attempts for UN-imposed sanctions, and thus diminishing the chances of a potential military intervention to stop the bloodshed. Making matters worse, no country is currently willing to commit to a military intervention in Syria as this would not only require a strong army presence, but could also lead to a total breakdown of order in the troubled region. Therefore, for now, Syria is yet another example of the failure of not only the UN, but most importantly the international community, which has reduced itself to merely a passive observer refusing to stop genocide as it unfolds before its eyes. The regulation and solution for this crisis exists, in the form of the R2P principle, but unfortunately several reasons continue to prevent the international community from stepping up to its momentous responsibility and enforcing it.

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[1] The Responsibility to Protect doctrine is often referred to as R2P and this abbreviation will be used in this paper.

[2] This was a substantial development in international relations, as according to British historian Martin Gilbert, it became the “most significant adjustment to sovereignty in 360 years” (Evans, 2011).

[3] The acronym is used in the place of its full name, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

[4] It should be noted that the opposition forces have also been charged with committing several war crimes, including the murder and torture of captured government soldiers and using children under the age of 18 as warriors (Anon., 2012)

[5] Some estimate that there would have to be at least 75,000 troops on ground in Syria in order to secure the country's chemical weapons, while the British Army General who was sent to help rebuild Iraq in 2003 noted that there would be more than 5 years of instability in the country even if Assad's regime was indeed toppled (Gardner, 2012).

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