

R2P in Syria: Regional Dimensions

Written by David Carment and Joe Landry

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DAVID CARMENT AND JOE LANDRY, FEB 8 2014

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The idea that Responsibility to Protect (R2P) has had or still has a place in the management of the Syrian conflict emanates largely from the experiences of Western countries in Libya where the core principles of R2P were evoked in order to justify a NATO-led mission to ostensibly protect the citizenry of that country. In his address to the people of the United States in advance of the bombing campaign that was to take place a few weeks later, President Obama was quite clear and specific in the intent and purpose of that intervention. The goal was only, in his words, to protect those citizens caught up in the conflict and being targeted by government forces.

Further, Obama went on to add that the mission was not intended to produce “regime change,” nor would harm come to those citizens who were unarmed and only seeking to escape the violence.[1] The fact that the outcome was decidedly different in several respects has drawn into question the sincerity of President Obama’s words and the real intent of the intervention. Ordinary citizens were indeed killed, though perhaps unintentionally, by allied bombing; regime change did, of course, occur; and, more importantly, the norm was compromised by the very actions taken by the allies themselves.

More specifically, a great deal of effort was taken by the interveners and other countries—several weeks of effort at a cost of millions—to carefully and safely remove expats and foreign workers from the conflict mostly through safe passage provided by shipping vessels and free exit out of the country into neighbouring states. This was not, however, a level of protection afforded the people of Libya. No effort was made to give these people free passage out of the country and, as a result, many were indeed caught up in the conflict there and died.

Further, even well before the onset of the bombing campaign, the ICC was unequivocal in its belief that crimes against humanity had been committed by Libya’s leader against his people—this without a full and proper investigation on the ground as to the acts of perpetrators on both sides.[2] In effect, this put Libya’s leader in a corner whose unsurprising reaction was to lash out and escalate the conflict. Little effort was made to properly mediate the conflict before it rapidly escalated out of control and had there been any openings available to the West to deescalate and avoid bloodshed, those were lost once threats to intervene were clearly made by President Obama and the leaders of allied nations.[3]

Clearly, then, this was not R2P’s shining moment—the principle itself was violated along the way and while many ordinary citizens may have been saved from the conflict, we can only guess as to whether, indeed, that is true, since such a conclusion requires a counterfactual analysis using information that is not easily evaluated and assessed.[4] In brief, R2P as practiced in Libya showed how easily the principle is open to political manipulation and—more importantly, perhaps—how much more investment is needed in the areas of prevention that would essentially impose on interveners costs for using a principle to advance their agendas far removed from protecting ordinary people.[5]

The bitterness that some supporters of R2P have felt about its use in the Libya conflict has manifested itself in the form of ambivalence toward the Syria conflict. Keep in mind that at the time when the Libya conflict was ramping up, there were those who clearly argued that both Yemen and Syria were in dire need of international attention and equally “deserving.”[6] What they observed was hypocrisy on the part of the international community to act swiftly in

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Libya while aiding and abetting the rebels in Syria, but not intervening forcefully. Of course, the two situations are vastly different in scope and complexity, and that explains, in part, the reluctance of outside players to get involved. Repeated efforts to mediate the dispute have failed and now the opportunity to do any form of responsibility-related action has been reduced to protecting those fleeing from the conflict. The UN has essentially given up counting the number of dead in the conflict, though it may well surpass 100,000.

The failure of major regional players in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region to apply and enforce the R2P doctrine in the case of the Syrian civil war represents a significant challenge to the international community, generally, and the norms of the doctrine itself, specifically. While the Libya conflict and the subsequent UN resolution to allow for the use of force enjoyed broad-based support from key regional organizations—such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), and the League of Arab States (LAS)—the case has not been quite the same in Syria. Without such strong support, the no-fly zone and subsequent NATO intervention in Libya would most likely not have been possible; the support of neighbouring countries was a key driver of the action that was taken to protect civilians in that case.[7] On the other hand, due to both wariness of the Western powers' intentions in Syria and the complex regional dynamics the MENA countries and their associated regional organizations currently face, the Syria case has proven itself to be much more difficult to tackle. The League of Arab States was initially hesitant to become involved in the conflict, however, after several months of violence, it did issue a peace plan and suspended Syria's membership. The National Coalition of the Syrian Opposition was officially recognized in November 2012 by both the League and the GCC as the legitimate representative body of the Syrian people. In March 2013, the Coalition took the official seat in the LAS. Furthermore, the LAS has been supportive of the UNSC efforts to broker a solution to the civil war; even so, with the stalemate in the UNSC, these efforts have been essentially for naught.

Indeed, for action to be taken in such a crisis, multilateral institutions, such as the United Nations, require both the support of regional organizations and, particularly, the P5 players in order to garner legitimacy and issue strong resolutions.[8] While the LAS has issued numerous statements regarding the crisis and attempted to broker peace agreements, generally speaking, the language of the R2P doctrine has not played a major role. Instead, the political stalemate in the region—with Iran and Russia promoting the norm of non-intervention and, on the opposition side, countries including Saudi Arabia and Qatar providing training and arms to the rebels—illustrates the inherent difficulty of promoting and enforcing the R2P doctrine. In this sense, the conflict can be thought of as a microcosm of a broader international dispute. All of this means that regional efforts to provide any meaningful intervention are nearly impossible without a major change in the current status quo, something that is not currently on the horizon. Furthermore, the overall stability of the MENA region has been negatively affected by the Syrian civil war. Lebanon, for example, has seen infighting between supporters of Assad and supporters of the rebels, with Hezbollah playing an active role in assisting the Assad government with its campaign. Israel has bombed targets inside of Syria, and the relationship between Syria and Turkey has been severely strained, with several incidents occurring along the border region.

Complex and volatile regional dynamics have hence played a critical role in the response—or, more accurately, the lack thereof—to the civil war in Syria. It is difficult to see a viable compromise that will lead the country, and subsequently the region, out of the current state of affairs. Without total victory on the side of either Assad or the rebels, it does not appear that both sides and their allies are willing to back down from this long and drawn-out conflict. Chemical weapons instructions have proven to be merely a lull in the larger conflict. The push-and-pull relationship between the regional supporters of Assad, such as Iran and Lebanon, and the regional supporters of the rebels (most of the LAS members) will continue to dominate these attempts to move forward with a political solution. Open dialogue at the UNSC must be continued, and both sides must be willing to compromise on some of the key demands of the combatants if a cease fire or comprehensive peace agreement is ever to be created and adopted in practice. Syria has become a state in name only, with territorial divisions decorating positions of strength. The rise of al Qaida may force the hand of the western countries to cease their flow of arms to the rebel forces until they can provide a more discriminating means to separate the two elements. More broadly, we ask what effect the situation in Syria will have on the R2P doctrine. Its lack of teeth in Libya demonstrated its weaknesses; R2P as a doctrine of intervention will only be implemented in very specific situations wherein the strategic benefits to the interveners outweigh the costs of intervention. On the other hand, when the political fallout caused by intervention is too much for

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the great powers to handle, R2P's coercive elements are much less likely to play a significant and viable role in determining their strategic actions. This is to suggest that greater emphasis must be placed on the preventive components of the doctrine where costs and risk can be anticipated in advance of large scale conflict.[9]

[1] Donette Murray, "Military action but not as we know it: Libya, Syria and the making of an Obama Doctrine," *Contemporary Politics* 19:2 (2013), 146-166. [2] Paul D. Williams, "Briefing The Road to Humanitarian War in Libya," *Global Responsibility to Protect* 3:2 (2011), 248-251. [3] Sid Rashid, "Preventive Diplomacy, Mediation and the Responsibility to Protect in Libya: A Missed Opportunity for Canada?" *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 19:1 (2013), 39-52. [4] *Ibid.* [5] Joakim Kreutz and Johan Brosche, "Responsibility to Talk: Mediation and Violence against Civilians," *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 19:1 (2013), 26-38. [6] Abdenmour Benantar, "Arab democratic uprisings: Domestic, regional and global implications," *New Global Studies* 5:1 (2011), 1-7. [7] Chris De Cock, "Operation Unified Protector and the Protection of Civilians in Libya," *Yearbook of International Humanitarian Law* 2011 14 (The Hague: TMC Asser Press, 2012), 213-235. [8] David Carment and Martin Fischer, "R2P and the Role of Regional Organisations in Ethnic Conflict Management, Prevention and Resolution: The Unfinished Agenda," *Global Responsibility to Protect* 1:3 (2009), 261-290. [9] Sid Rashid, "Preventive Diplomacy, Mediation and the Responsibility to Protect in Libya: A Missed Opportunity for Canada?" *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 19:1 (2013), 39-52.

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