

Humanitarian Interventionism Is Dead, Long Live Humanitarian Interventionism

Written by Robert Mason

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ROBERT MASON, NOV 3 2017

The Syria conflict has highlighted the difficulty of getting governments to accept responsibility for their actions and the actions of other agents within their borders. If we are to accept the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states, then surely state responsibility must be a pre-requisite.

Since this cannot be guaranteed, interventionism of some kind should be conscionable. Examples abound where states are simply not interested in relieving the suffering of their nation or are actively engaged in their persecution, at times amounting to genocide. Samantha Power talked about historic situations where the U.S. had failed to act in her book *A Problem from Hell*, from not protecting the Jewish citizenry in Europe, to the Armenian genocide, Cambodia, and “ethnic cleansings” in Kosovo. In 2008, Myanmar was unwilling to accept foreign aid to ease the domestic suffering caused by Cyclone Nargis. Since 2015, the Rohingya, who are not even recognized as belonging to the nation, have been expelled.

Just this week, Burundi is withdrawing from the International Criminal Court (ICC) because it believes the ICC’s actions are biased against African states. This comes at a time when the UN Commission of Inquiry on Burundi believes that crimes against humanity have been committed since April 2015, and continue to be committed, including extra-judicial killings, arbitrary arrests and detention, torture and sexual violence.

There is clearly more than can be done by the UN Security Council.

The Russians and Chinese are both opposed to humanitarian or liberal interventionism because it can be used as grounds for unjustified regime change and potentially be directed at illiberal states such as themselves. President Putin noted in his 2015 UN General Assembly speech the “conceit” of those at the top of the global power pyramid who continue to act with exception and impunity. NATO interventions in recent years have supported the view that anarchy is spreading in the Middle East and North Africa and that this is somehow the wrong course of action. The NATO intervention in the former Yugoslavia was and remains questionable to Russia, the U.S. intervention in Iraq was a disaster by most metrics, and UNSCR 1973 on Libya may have avoided a bloodbath in Benghazi but in no way addressed the underlying problems of transition which has led to bloodshed since. NATO enlargement and the intervention in Libya also led to a Russian backlash against perceived NATO encroachment in eastern Europe and in the Middle East respectively, which has helped to sustain the intractable conflict in Syria. Whilst human rights and humanitarian interventionism has grown in popularity in western foreign policy, it is often derided by its critics as self-serving, selective and at times, ineffective.

Most in the UN Security Council also acknowledge UN Security Council Resolutions are blunt instruments, so isn’t it time to drop interventionism per se and work towards establishing the rules of the road and more specific measures tailored to each case based on accepted facts. This may be more difficult than it sounds based on Russia’s unwillingness to accept the recent UN-OPCW report on Syria, but further debate could lead to more concrete action. Confidence building measures between member states would also go a long way to addressing some of the underlying issues.

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Any measures aimed at tackling human rights abuses brought before the UN Security Council must be more cognizant of 'the day after'. What will the response to the measures specifically? What will happen if the regime stays in situ? What will happen if it is toppled? The consequences of poorly implemented measures can be dire so it's not just a Responsibility to Protect but a Responsibility to Implement Effective Policy. Sanctions, oil for food programs, aid and investment reductions, visa denials, cutting diplomatic relations and arms embargoes will not cut it anymore. Proportional response is not the issue, effectiveness is. The permanent members must work harder to find new common ground. There is a necessity to be more consistent in the application of a universal human rights based approach throughout each member's sphere of influence (and others) in a multi-polar world, otherwise it will continue to undermine the whole norm.

Consensus is key.

About the author:

Robert Mason is Associate Professor and Director of the Middle East Studies Center at the American University in Cairo. His most recent book is *Reassessing Order and Disorder in the Middle East: Regional Imbalance or Disintegration?* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2017).