MILITARY INTERVENTION IN SYRIA IS NOT A VIABLE POLICY OPTION

By Natalie Swabb

As the nearly two-year civil war in Syria continues and the death toll rises, the debate on military intervention as a means to end the conflict has intensified. Although Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s January 6 speech gave no indication that he would step down from power, the international community, should not overreact by using it as a justification for intervention. Military involvement in Syria would be an irreparable policy mistake leading to potentially devastating consequences for an already delicate regional situation. Although the Responsibility to Protect Doctrine has its merits, it would not be advisable to employ value-driven principles in a uniform manner across a diversity of cases without considering their wider implications.

The R2P norm established by the United Nations asserts that a state has the responsibility to protect its population from mass atrocities and if it is unable to do so, the international community has the responsibility to assist the state. If both of these efforts fail, intervention comes into play, with military intervention as a last resort. Aimed at preventing genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing, R2P served as the justification for military intervention in Libya in 2011.

However, Syria is not Libya. The Libyan intervention was a special case and should not be used as point of comparison for Syria. Protests against Qaddafi began in February 2011 and the international community worked in a surprisingly harmonious fashion to freeze his assets and impose sanctions. When the situation worsened, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1973 and by late March there was a NATO-administered no-fly zone. By October Qaddafi was dead and Operation Unified Protector was over.

While the application of R2P in Libya could be taken as precedent for Syria, the similarities between the cases are actually quite limited. Libya’s lack of strategic importance to members of the UN Security Council and the weakness of Qaddafi’s army and air force made intervention an easy political decision. However, in Syria, even after nearly two years of conflict, Russia and China continue to halt UN diplomatic efforts. Syria was a strategic Russian ally and the Russians have provided the Assad regime with the majority of its military power. Compared to Libya, the Syrian army poses a much greater threat. With a stronger Syrian air force, implementing a no-fly zone constitutes a greater risk of foreign military boots on the ground if there were to be an intervention.

In fact, there are more points of comparison with the case of Iraq. The Bush Administration went outside of accepted diplomatic circles in 2003 when the US invaded Iraq. The invasion and nearly nine years of war destabilized Iraq, pushed it closer to Iran and damaged US relationships in the region. Military action in Syria poses similar threats. Like Iraq, the post-intervention scenario presents important considerations. With a fractionalized Syrian opposition, who would take power once the regime falls? Would an Assad-free Syria ignite Iran and Hezbollah? Would the Islamists that are hostile to the US that are known to be among the Free Syrian Army capitalize on the weakness of Syria without a strong dictator? These are issues military intervention could cause, not fix.

Just as the logistics in Syria are not conducive to military intervention, neither is the academic research. The existing research on civil wars can better inform policymakers on the harmful short and long term consequences of military intervention. Studies indicate that intervention prolongs the duration of the conflict, especially when the conflict attracts opposing interventions. Other studies take the intervention critique a step further, arguing that intervention actually inhibits the development of democratic institutions post-conflict.

Although current logistics and academic research are not on the side of military intervention in Syria, the international community does have policy options. Diplomacy is crucial. For example, the US and its allies should work diligently to persuade Russia to stop its support for the Assad regime because opposing interventions (as we see with Russia supporting Assad and the Friends of Syria supporting the rebels) can prolong the duration of a conflict.

In addition to diplomatic efforts, the international community can continue to fund and supply the rebels. We can increase sanctions and freeze the assets of the Assad cronies. We can work with local and international

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organizations to streamline the humanitarian aid process. We can begin working on a plan with the Syrian National Coalition for Opposition and Revolutionary Forces to promote local security when Assad falls.

In the long term, reevaluating the one-size-fits-all R2P approach is crucial.\(^3\) R2P is stuck between a rock and a hard place. Working within R2P framework is far too politically tinged and working outside it is seen as imperialistic. The international community needs to find some streamlined, middle-of-the-road policy options to assist in the prevention mass atrocities that are not subject to such heated debate.

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**About the Author:**

Natalie Swabb is a Master in Public and International Affairs candidate at the University of Pittsburgh expected to graduate in April 2013 with a major in human security.

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