



Limited military intervention in Syria: how to rescue the Responsibility to Protect doctrine from permanent demise

Benedetta Berti, 16th March 2012

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As the violence within Syria continues, causing massive civilian suffering and threatening stability in the region, the international community must get involved. A 'R2P intervention' presents a reasonable chance of success, while also promising to rescue the R2P norm from its current state of decline.

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In the past few days there has been increasing international pressure to abandon the current non-intervention policy with respect to Syria. The ongoing brutality of the Syrian regime against its own citizens, the growing number of defections from both Assad's security and political establishment, and the realization that political pressure and sanctions alone are unlikely to tip the balance of power in favour of the opposition and stop the violence have all led to an increase in the number of those advocating for direct military involvement. However, there seems to be no agreement on whether the international community should aim to 'go big' - openly pursuing regime change - or to restrain itself and conduct a purely 'humanitarian' operation to stop the violence against the civilian population.

In the context of this complex debate over which military option should be pursued in Syria, an often overlooked argument in defense of a small, limited military engagement is the effect that such action would have on the so-called 'responsibility to protect' (R2P) doctrine. Specifically, a limited 'R2P intervention' could be the key to save this emerging norm from its present state of crisis.

The current predicament of the R2P doctrine is perhaps surprising, given that only a year ago - in March 2011 - the UN Security Council invoked Libya's responsibility to protect its citizens when passing [resolution 1973](#) [10], openly calling for the use of all necessary means to protect the civilian population in Libya. The UNSC-authorized and NATO-led military operation in Libya against Gaddafi was at the time interpreted as a crucial step towards giving legitimacy and recognition to the emerging R2P norm. This concept, forged in the past decade to lay down the ground rules for humanitarian intervention, basically postulates that sovereignty should not be characterized as an absolute right of states, but rather as contingent to the state's capacity and willingness to protect its citizens. If the state is unable or unwilling to do so, the international community has a responsibility to intervene to stop gross human rights violations and end massive civilian suffering.



However, only a year after passing UNSC Resolution 1973, international enthusiasm towards the emerging R2P doctrine seems weaker than ever, as the frail consensus over the norm is further eroded by the failure to intervene in Syria. To explain this unfortunate state of affairs, it is necessary to understand the deeply negative impact that the NATO-led mission in Libya had on the credibility of the R2P doctrine.

On the one hand, the NATO operation certainly complied with a number of central guiding principles of R2P interventions: it was a mission designed to stop massive civilian suffering, it was undertaken as a 'last resort' following political, diplomatic and economic measures and with the 'right intention' of ending the violence, and it had reasonable chances of success. What's more, the military intervention in Libya was conducted under the explicit authorization of the UN Security Council, a welcome change from the 'illegal but legitimate' NATO operations in Kosovo.

On the other hand, the intervention in Libya had one major shortcoming: it did not stick to [its original mandate](#) [11] - which was limited to protecting the civilian population and enforcing sanctions, while quite explicitly 'excluding a foreign occupation force of any form on any part of Libyan territory.' Even though regime change is something explicitly outside the boundaries of R2P interventions, the NATO military engagement soon expanded its operations and openly engaged in military actions designed to topple Gaddafi and his regime, thus de facto expanding the boundaries of its limited 'humanitarian' mandate.

Although supporters of the NATO intervention in Libya have repeatedly argued that regime change was in fact necessary in order to fulfill the original mandate and protect the civilian population, not everybody has been convinced by this argument. Specifically, China and Russia have been particularly skeptical towards this interpretation, feeling that they were 'fooled' into abstaining from stopping the intervention in Libya only to later discover that the R2P doctrine had been used as a pretext to bring about regime change.

In turn, this perception has curbed the international level of enthusiasm for the R2P doctrine, while directly affecting China and Russia's respective postures with regard to supporting another R2P-styled intervention in Syria.

Put simply, the mission creep in Libya undermined the level of international consensus for the R2P norm and laid the basis for the ongoing reluctance to authorize a similar mission in Syria. In turn, the ongoing lack of international response to the violence perpetrated by the Assad regime further undermines what is left of the credibility and strength of the R2P norm.

In this context, limited military involvement in Syria is precisely what is needed in order to revive an international consensus for the 'responsibility to protect' doctrine. An R2P-styled intervention in Syria would in fact comply with the basic R2P requirements: military intervention would be a response to massive civilian suffering; it would be undertaken as a last resort after a number of economic, diplomatic, and political measures had failed; and the intention would be to protect the civilian population. Furthermore, a limited military involvement would need to stick to its original mandate and refrain from openly pursuing regime change, focusing instead on protecting the civilian population and facilitating the entry into Syria of international humanitarian organizations.

This would not only provide relief to the Syrian population, but it would also be beneficial to the opposition forces, allowing them to benefit from a 'sanctuary' wherein to regroup. Conducted under these strict rules of engagement, the military intervention in Syria would have a reasonable chance to ease the level of violence and facilitate an end to the hostilities, while also restoring a measure of credibility to the R2P norm. Of course the biggest stumbling block to this type of solution is the current paralysis of the UNSC and its inability to authorize military involvement in Syria - in turn one of the requirements of 'R2P interventions.'

However, short of UNSC authorization, there remains the option of resorting to a UN General Assembly 'uniting for peace' resolution supporting military involvement. Although such a resolution would not be binding like the one issued by the UNSC, it could still provide international legitimacy to the mission.



As the violence within Syria continues, causing massive civilian suffering as well as threatening the level of stability of the region, there is a growing sense that the international community has both an interest and a responsibility to get involved. Doing so through a 'R2P intervention' offers a reasonable chances of success, while also promising to rescue the R2P norm from its current state of decline.

Country or region: Syria

Topics: Conflict

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