

Back to the Quagmire

Beyond Diplomacy in Syria

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I. Introduction

Whilst there is reason to be positive about the ongoing Geneva negotiations between the Assad government and the opposition, the general consensus is that there is little chance of these talks leading to any substantial progress.

The reason for this underlying feeling is as clear as it is familiar; the rebels ultimately demand Assad goes, Assad refuses to do so. The opposition (consisting of the Western-backed Syria National Coalition), are weak, exhausted by simultaneous conflict with the organised and Russian/Iranian backed Assad government and increasingly influential Islamist groups.

It has become difficult to envision an ideal outcome of the now intractable conflict. Recalling the calls for a diplomatic solution in Libya, the key issue was neither group would ever yield to the others conditions, as ultimately, they both believed they could either win, or could not be defeated by the other. The growing presence of Al Qaeda-affiliated groups complicates the situation further, and gives Assad a certain legitimacy in demonstrating the risks of a political void should he leave. Assertions such as Australian Prime Minister's Tony Abbott's that this is a conflict of

“baddies versus baddies” are common.

In the mean time, the conflict is an overwhelming humanitarian catastrophe. Roughly 130,000 people have died in the crisis so far (including around 2,000 in the week and a half since the Geneva talks began¹). Atrocities are committed on a daily basis, by the regime, but also by the rebels (including 'moderate' groups). A recent report with a cache of over 50,000 photographs presented examples of barbarism under the Assad regime.²

In terms of R2P and humanitarian intervention, calls for such action now appear fantasy. Intervening is politically infeasible, and perceived as practically so (for good reason). The ideal moment for intervention has long since passed, when the opposition was relatively strong and united and the mood for intervention substantially more accepting than it is now.

The rather less ideal 'trigger' for action, in the use of chemical weapons, was fumbled in the now characteristically clumsy Western diplomacy surrounding Syria. The eventual agreement revealed the lack of desire on the West's part for any substantive action, instead granting legitimacy and a form of partnership with the Assad regime in agreeing to relinquish their chemical weapons.

The West has very openly tied itself to an ultimate end-goal of regime change in some form. Whilst

¹ Ian Black. The Guardian., 31st Jan 2014. [Link](#)

² BBC News, 22nd Jan 2014. [Link](#)

arguably inevitable if the situation is to be resolved, this does limit the lengths diplomacy can take us. Furthermore, even minor resolutions in the Security Council have been made impossible, as Syria's backer Russia – already distrustful following what it perceived as the over-stretching of the UN resolution authorising intervention in Libya – continues to protect its ally.

II. Clutching at Straws

In view of this bleak outlook, options have been presented to address the balance on the ground. The current issue of the Economist (notably hawkish with regard to Syria) argues that if we in the West are serious about improving the current situation, we should begin arming the rebels.³ The subsequent news that the US congress has agreed to begin providing arms to 'moderate' groups is a potentially significant step in the conflict.⁴

In many ways this argument has validity. The Assad regime already receives heavy material support from Russia and Iran, including heavy armaments and sophisticated anti-aircraft systems. Addressing the balance would give the rebels (and their western backers) more leverage at the negotiating table, and hopefully reassert moderate rebel group's dominant position over competing and often extremist alternatives. It is worth noting that the Saudi's have been providing

the rebels with arms since early on in the conflict.

However, one should view this prospect with some caution. Even if (as the Economist believes) these arms would not fall into the hands of extremist groups – the primary fear of Western politicians (who have previously cut aid when it was allegedly being received by such groups⁵) – there is no guarantee such action would achieve these hoped for results.

To begin, it is unlikely supplying arms would provide any definitive advantage sufficient to end the crisis alone. This is recognised by advocates, who argue such actions are instead intended to redress the balance of power, hopefully leading to a mutually hurting stalemate between the belligerents, leading to more serious negotiations.

Recalling the earlier example of Libya, it is entirely possible such actions would serve to elongate and escalate the conflict further, feeding into what is already an ongoing proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Additionally, providing the rebels with arms will render diplomacy more difficult in the short term, as Assad and his backers are unlikely to discuss solutions with those arming his opposition. One is caught between this fear and the knowledge that the regime will continue to receive foreign support regardless of the West's actions.

As a further issue, whilst these actions may be just in addressing the balance with the clearly

³ The Economist, 25th Jan 2014. [Link](#)

⁴ Mark Hosenball. Reuters, 27th Jan 2014. [Link](#)

⁵ BBC News, 11th Dec 2013. [Link](#)

thuggish and illegitimate Assad regime, they would struggle to be defined as humanitarian.

Arming the rebels in Libya was one of the commonly cited arguments put forward to demonstrate a lack of *humanitarian* intent behind the intervention, but instead geopolitical king-making and regime change. As Jonathan Eyal – from the Royal United Services Institute – skilfully demonstrated, such actions may have played a role in ending the crisis more quickly, but are very difficult to justify under R2P.⁶ This was one of the factors cited as undermining the Libyan intervention's legitimacy as a whole, an argument made by some of the key thinkers behind R2P such as Gareth Evans and Ramesh Thakur.⁷

As a means to an end, arming the rebels may be an useful policy, but whether it produces humanitarian benefits would be highly speculative assertion. Indeed, particularly following the controversial elements of the Libyan intervention, if these actions were associated with R2P it may produce significant fallout for the concept.

III. Looking Past Geneva

The myriad of issues with any proposal put

⁶ Jonathan Eyal. *The Responsibility to Protect, A Chance Missed*. In: Johnson, A., and Mueen, S. (2012). *Short War, Long Shadow*. Royal United Services Institute, Whitehall Report 1-12. [Link](#)

⁷ Gareth Evans, Ramesh Thakur, Robert Pape. (2013) *Correspondence, Humanitarian Intervention and the Responsibility to Protect*. International Security, Vol. 37, No. 4, pp. 199-214.

forward to address the Syrian crisis is troubling. In terms of intervention, the eminent just cause in Syria does not necessarily mean it would have a positive outcome at present. This fact is exacerbated by the fact that there would be no chance of Security Council authorisation (or indeed even limited action).

A lack of clear end-goals beyond the removal of the Assad regime and the subsequently dangerous political vacuum is as much of an impediment as the practicalities of military action. In the event regime change occurred, extremist opposition groups and sectarian divides within Syria would make the post-conflict context incredibly dangerous, perhaps even the worst case scenario in both humanitarian terms and regional security.

As a result, few advocates of R2P are advocating a full 'boots-on-the-ground' intervention in Syria. The principle of 'proportionality' (where the use of force should be the minimum to address the crisis), would be near-impossible to ascertain. Intervention in this context is too uncertain and too risky. It may do more harm than good.

There is relevance to Rory Stewart MP's assertion that, in intervention, we must recognise decisions are made on the basis of what we *can* do, not what we *wish* was possible.⁸ Difficult decisions in intervention often constitute choosing the 'least-bad' option presented. In the case of Syria, many

⁸ In: Greg Knaus, Rory Stewart. (2012). *Can Intervention Work?*. New York: Norton & Company.

influential scholars have demonstrated there are few 'good' options available.⁹

The crisis has asked serious questions of the R2P norm and its influence within the international community. However, what it actually demonstrates is major actions (even for overwhelmingly humanitarian reasons), require a cost-benefit analysis.

Those concerned that the Syrian crisis will erode the influence of R2P should consider the above reality. Actions taken will always have a political and practical dimension. Furthermore, R2P was cited by the UN Security Council regarding situations in Mali, Sudan/South Sudan and the Central African Republic in the last two years (in the latter's case as recently as December 2013).¹⁰

R2P is commonly raised in relation to Syria, and the conflict remains a foremost international issue, but it is not conducive to the reactive component of R2P at present. Following similar concern that controversy surrounding Libya had 'damaged' the norm, fears for it may be exaggerated.

IV. Alternative Options in Syria

Whilst there are indeed few viable policy choices close to hand. A 'boots-on-the-ground' intervention is as unpredictable as it is unlikely. Arming the rebels is also unpredictable and does

little to address the humanitarian crisis in the short term. Observers have raised alternative policy options:

1: Limited Military Action

Early in the conflict, many observers strongly argued for measures similar to the no-fly zone utilised in Libya, and other forms of limited action, designed, in part, to tip the balance in the rebels favour. However, at present, arguments for 'no-kill zones', 'humanitarian corridors' and no-fly zones have gone cold.

The regime is far more prepared than it once was for such actions (including its new Russian anti-aircraft systems), the conflict is far more complex and the opposition far more weak and divided. Practically speaking, a no-fly zone would be incredibly expensive (unsustainable so) to maintain for the time surely required to begin tipping the balance.

Following the definitive discovery of chemical weapon use by the Assad regime, the threat of 'punitive strikes' by the US administration would have likely been composed of cruise missile strikes from the Mediterranean. However, as Richard Betts demonstrates, at this point in an intense conflict, such strikes would be 'pinpricks', which may "actually signal a lack of serious purpose."¹¹ This argument would likely stand for the majority of 'limited' action available.

Furthermore, when would these actions 'end'?

⁹ Peter Berger. CNN, 1st Sept 2013. [Link](#)
Richard K Betts. Foreign Affairs, 5th Sept 2013. [Link](#)

¹⁰ Global R2P, 13th April 2013. [Link](#)

¹¹ Richard K Betts. Foreign Affairs, 5th Sept 2013. [Link](#)

The logical end-point would be Assad's removal from power, but how long would that take? Assad's removal would not even be guaranteed with limited action. There would also be the post-conflict context; how would we guarantee Islamist groups do not seize control? Recall R2P's stipulated 'Responsibility to Rebuild' following the crisis to ensure atrocities do not recur.

2: 'Pure' Humanitarianism

In the Geneva negotiations, one of the more realistic hopes is some minor humanitarian concessions by the Assad regime. The Economist however argues this may serve to strengthen the regime, as aid delivery through UN agencies will require the regime's cooperation and consent, which serves to further provide the regime with legitimacy.

This may be true, but any avenue for action in Syria should be exploited. The humanitarian situation is dire, and reverse of this argument is the regime may need to moderate it's behaviour when under observation by UN and other international officials. Purely humanitarian action is also more likely to find a Security Council consensus. In view of the ongoing humanitarian disaster in Homs, which has been subjected to a 'starvation siege', immediate UN relief is necessary, and should be pushed for.

3: Diplomatic Options

The culmination of the international community's

diplomatic efforts have been the current negotiations in Geneva. Unfortunately, it is unlikely the Assad negotiating team has the remit to agree to anything substantial. However, as above, pushing for concessions where possible (or even a temporary ceasefire), would be positive.

Furthermore, diplomatic options do not end with the Assad regime. Pressure on the Russian and Iranian governments, without whom Assad would be in a much worse position, is equally necessary. One of the foremost arguments for arming the rebels, is that Iran would be unwilling to indefinitely fund the Assad regime's endless demands. It is worth noting that a highly influential factor in forcing the Milosevic regime to withdraw during the 1999 intervention in Kosovo, was pressure from it's Russian protector.

V. Summary

The current outlook is indeed bleak, and the crisis continues to appear intractable. The unfortunate reality is that the West may be forced to respond to events pragmatically. Policy options such as supplying arms to the rebels, have merit, and may be worth further consideration, but one must also consider the end-goal of such action, and what our response would be if it does not yield results.

One must also recall that inaction also constitutes an action in-itself. Inaction will see the rebels further under-trodden, further fictionalised, and

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benefit Assad's position. Thus it is pressing to search for alternative options.

In terms of further action, responding pragmatically may take differing forms. If there is an opportunity to be exploited, such as major concessions by the regime or rebel advances on the ground, we should be ready to recognise such opportunities, and not miss an opportunity as the international community did previously. Equally important, are flashpoints reminiscent of Srebrenica, where the atrocities reach such a point that we would face a true last resort.

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