

The Responsibility to Protect after Libya – dead, dying or thriving? openDemocracy Maggie Powers

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The UN Security Council has once again failed to protect the people of Syria from mass atrocities with Russia and China wielding another double veto on May 22 (to block a resolution that would have referred the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court). But does this mean the doctrine of Responsibility to Protect (R2P), intended as a political and policy tool to halt mass atrocities, has also failed?

Intense backlash against R2P emerged in the wake of the 2011 NATO intervention in Libya and the failure of the international community to respond adequately to the horrors in Syria. But how significant is that backlash? An analysis of Security Council records reveals that, far from dying with Libya or Syria as some would have expected, R2P policies continue to be invoked and implemented by the Council.

Empirical text analysis of all Security Council resolutions, presidential statements, and open meeting records from September 14, 2005 through February 28, 2014 reveals four trends in the frequency of R2P use, and all point to the norm's continued utilization and entrenchment.

The analysis tracks the frequency of explicit references to the "responsibility to protect" (and equivalent phrases, e.g. "responsibility of government X to protect") and categorizes those references as affirmative, negative, neutral or other, as well as by pillar of R2P referenced. These three pillars being: (i) the primary duty of the state concerned to prevent or halt atrocities; (ii) the responsibility of other states and the international community to assist in this effort; and (iii) where a state fails to prevent or halt mass atrocities, the responsibility of other states and the international community to act collectively, including with force if necessary.

The results reveal that the debate surrounding R2P has shifted. It is no longer a question of whether the international community has a responsibility in the face of atrocities; it is a question of what the best, most impactful solutions are to address a situation. Each of the four trends will be discussed in turn. (...)

The international community may not yet meet its obligation to 'never again' stand idly by in the face of mass atrocities, but states are actively invoking and strengthening their response mechanisms and, hopefully, paving the way for improved, rapid, and appropriate prevention and reaction in the future.

R2P is not dead. If anything, the debates and concern following the intervention in Libya and the shock to our common humanity from the ongoing crisis in Syria have deepened and expanded the normative internalization of the doctrine. What remains is moving that rhetorical commitment from words to deeds and using the moral and political legitimacy of R2P to implement smart, effective policies to prevent and put a stop to mass atrocities.

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