

The Perversion of Sovereignty
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James Traub is a contributing writer at The New York Times and director of policy at the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. His article explores different conceptions of sovereignty within United Nation member states, and the evolution of sovereignty in debates over the Responsibility to Protect.

When UN Secretary General Kofi Annan delivered his annual address to the General Assembly in 1999, he bluntly reminded the gathered heads of state of the UN's failure to act to stop ethnic cleansing earlier that year in Kosovo - a failure that had in turn provoked NATO to initiate an air war over Serbia without Security Council approval. That episode, Annan asserted, "has revealed the core challenge to the Security Council and the United Nations as a whole in the next century: to forge unity behind the principle that massive and systematic violations of human rights - wherever they may take place - should not be allowed to stand." Annan declared that the UN must embrace the "developing international norm in favor of intervention to protect civilians from wholesale slaughter."

The norm Annan cited had, of course, begun to take root in the aftermath of the genocide in Rwanda, which the world had witnessed with little more than a cry of anguished guilt, and the ethnic cleansing and mass death in Bosnia, to which the UN Security Council had replied with a humanitarian mission protected by ill-equipped and outnumbered peacekeepers. Annan had been sounding this theme for the previous eighteen months, prompting hope across the West that the UN, and the Security Council, might eventually discover its moral purpose. ()

With his speech, Annan did not so much open as reveal a fault line of global politics. In trying to convert an incipient practice into a worldwide norm, Annan had forced into the open a rancorous argument over the significance, and the salience, of sovereignty. Annan felt that he had to instigate the debate in order to gain consensus on the question. And one could argue that he succeeded handsomely, since heads of state gathered for another such meeting six years later unanimously approved the doctrine of "the **responsibility to protect**," a re-formulated descendant of humanitarian intervention. (...)

Full Paper: <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Current-Affairs/Security-Watch/Detail/?ots591=4888CAA0-B3DB-1461-98B9-E20E7B9C13D4&lng=en&id=97239>