

Does the lesson from Syria imply it is better to save no one? The Globe and Mail Kyle Matthews

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When NATO enforced UN Security Council Resolution 1973

by establishing a no-fly zone to halt Moammar Gadhafi's regime from attacking the city of Benghazi, many critics voiced opposition. Their logic seemed to be that since the international community could not intervene everywhere that mass atrocities were looming, it should not bother trying at all.(...)

Fast-forward a few years. After 12 months of inaction on the part of the international community in the face of atrocities carried out by religious zealots in the northern part of Mali, France intervened militarily and liberated the cities of Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal. That French President François Hollande answered Bamako's plea for outside assistance, which was fully supported by all countries in West Africa, as well as the African Union, has been perceived by some as ill-intentioned. In a Globe

op-ed

, Gerald Caplan warned that we should be wary of supporting France. Rather than directing hostility at those non-state actors hacking off the limbs of civilians in Timbuktu, Mr. Caplan focuses on the fact that both Paris and Washington "have been long-time proponents of R2P – the Right to Plunder."

R2P, which actually stands for the "responsibility to protect," is a political commitment made by all 192 governments seated at the UN in 2005 to break the cycle of standing idle when mass atrocities (genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and ethnic cleansing) are occurring or about to occur. The African architects of R2P, South Sudanese scholar and diplomat Francis Deng and former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan, might disagree with Mr. Caplan's reading of the situation in Mali and the assertion that R2P is a cover to advance the interests of mining firms in the West.

Western countries have pretty much stood on the sidelines of the Syrian crisis. On one side, we have witnessed Russia and China using their veto power a total of three times within the UN Security Council to protect Assad's regime, while Iran continues to provide direct military aid to Damascus. On the other side, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Turkey have shipped arms and facilitated the movement of jihadists into Syria with the hopes of toppling the government.

With more than 60,000 civilian deaths and millions displaced so far, it is understandable that so many remain skeptical that anything can actually be done to halt atrocities and protect civilians. It would be a mistake to lose sight of the progress that has been made.(...)

While the “power of witness” has usually resided with journalists and the news media, the digital media revolution and new technologies now enable NGOs and individual citizens to capture evidence and track who is committing atrocities, as well as what individuals or governments are enabling these crimes. Syria demonstrates how evidence of atrocities can be captured, recorded, and shared with the international community via social media. Conspiracies of silence appear to be becoming a thing of the past.

George Clooney’s
Satellite Sentinel Project

is spearheading outside-the-box thinking in its use of technologies that just a few decades ago were the private domain of a select group of powerful countries. Using the services of DigitalGlobe, a company that sells digital satellite imagery, it monitors the border between Sudan and South Sudan, recording and analyzing images of the movement of military aircraft and troops, burning villages, and mass graves.

The global fight to combat mass-atrocity crimes is marked by more failures than successes, but real progress is being made. While we might never be able to halt all atrocities, in the years ahead it will increasingly become more difficult for governments and non-state actors to literally get away with murder. (...)

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