

Will Syria Follow Libya Interview of Special Advisor on the Responsibility to Protect, Dr. Edward Luck Bernard Gwertzman Council on Foreign Relations 1 September 2011

(...)

How important was the UN Security Council action allowing use of force to protect civilians in Libya, which tipped the military scales against Qaddafi?

I think it was quite an important precedent, both in

[Resolution 1970](#)

, which talked about sanctions and referred Qaddafi and some of his people to the International Criminal Court, and then in

[Resolution 1973](#)

, which talked about all necessary measures to protect populations--both of those invoked the **responsibility to protect**

. That resolution led to the NATO air umbrella over Libya and the direct military action on the government forces.

It was important that the members of the council didn't find that to be controversial. In other words, the principle was agreed upon. There were some differences on how to go about it, but it was clear that a government that seems to be virtually at war with its people, that attacks peaceful protesters with aircraft, with advanced weaponry, with military force, with mercenaries; clearly this is not part of normal governance. That, simply, is not acceptable. (...)

Did it help that Qaddafi himself made incendiary comments about "killing these rats" or "cockroaches" when talking about the opposition that had seized power in Benghazi?

Commitments were made by the heads of state at the World Summit in 2005, who said that they would not only try to prevent crimes against humanity but would also seek to prevent their incitement. That summit included important wording on "

Responsibility to Protect

" which has since become known as "R2P." So, when Qaddafi decided to characterize the protestors as "cockroaches"--the same term that had been used vis-à-vis the Tutsis in the Rwandan genocide [1994]--that was a very worrisome sign. (...)

In Syria, the government has not used that kind of incendiary language. The government of President Bashar al-Assad claims they're fighting terrorists or foreign enemies. Does that make it harder for the UN to do what it was able to do in Libya?

Certainly, the fact that the government in Damascus has been more careful with its rhetoric means that the case there was not as obvious. (...) Over time, it seems that there is reason to believe that crimes against humanity may well have been committed there. When the Syrian government refused to allow the UN investigators on its territory, which had been mandated by the Human Rights Council; when it tried to cut off all media [and] Internet connections, these were clear, worrying signs because one begins to ask what they are trying to hide. (...)

Going back to Libya for a moment, why do you think that the Russians and Chinese did not use a veto, which they have threatened to do in the case of Syria?

I think there are two important factors. One, as I mentioned, is that the **responsibility to protect** really does have a large public following around the world. These are standards that people expect governments to follow, and they expect the international community, in particular the United Nations, to respond in these kinds of situations. But the other important difference was a question of regional pressure. There was a lot of regional pressure to act in the case of Libya, and I know that even countries that are rather cautious about the responsibility to protect felt that in that particular case they couldn't go against the Arab League [or] against the African Union and try to block this kind of action. (...)

How do you think the situation will resolve itself in Syria?

(...) I think one hopes that there are internal political processes within Syria that will lead to a changing attitude, and we noticed that many countries in the region are hardening their attitude and putting more pressure on the Syrian government to act. Syria doesn't have as many friends as it did in the beginning. And we hope that will convince them to change course. (...)

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[interview](#)

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