

Syria and the Limits of Responsibility to Protect US News Heather Hurlburt and Homa Hassan 27 August 2013 It

wasn't supposed to be this way. When United Nations members were prodded to establish a "[responsibility to protect](#)

" doctrine, establishing that states must secure the lives of their citizens and that if they fail outsiders may step in, advocates assumed that heightened awareness and acknowledgement of atrocities would be enough to impel more visible international action – in contrast to the debacles in the 1990s, in which hundreds of thousands of civilians died in Rwanda and Bosnia, and the international community split over the legitimacy of humanitarian intervention.

Two years in, Syria increasingly resembles Bosnia at the same juncture, with 100,000 dead and a seemingly insurmountable split at the U.N. And, as was the case in Bosnia, it is concerns other than humanitarian that now seem to have pushed the use of force to the top of the West's agenda.

But R2P, as it is widely known, *has*

been invoked in Syria, and arguably just the way its framers – who did not want to legitimize military intervention and saw the goal as prevention and early response – intended. As the international community seems to be moving out of what we'll call the R2P stage of its response to Syria, and into a security interest phase (concern with chemical weapons, extremist groups, and regional spillover), let's review what R2P did accomplish.

Syria has been officially reminded of its responsibility to protect its people by various international entities over two dozen times, and the international community has cited its own responsibility to protect Syria, as well. All parties – including Russia and China, which have blocked key U.N. Security Council actions – agree that mass killings are taking place and that the government's actions are unethical, a factor that took years to establish in the Balkans. In fact, there is broad consensus that what is happening in Syria is a legitimate subject of international community debate and response – again, in contrast to the first years of Bosnia.

United Nations machinery has been highly active on the conflict, despite the Security Council being able to pass only three resolutions, and the General Assembly four, since the conflict began. The U.N.'s much-maligned Human Rights Council, on the other hand, has passed 10 and has done much to make the scope of the killing well-known globally. Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon has used his discretionary powers to shape the way the conflict is understood and debated: from U.N. investigators deriving broadly-accepted casualty statistics for the conflict, to the sending of observers, chemical weapons investigators and a special representative.

Prodded by the U.N., international humanitarian assistance has skyrocketed from \$37.4 million from a handful of countries in 2011 to \$398.3 million from three times as many donors in 2012.

In 2013 alone, \$2.8 billion of humanitarian aid is being funneled to Syrians.

The U.S., Norway, Switzerland, Japan and Australia have levied sanctions on Syria, in addition to eight rounds from Canada. The European Union has also issued over a dozen comprehensive sanctions ranging from travel bans and asset freezes on Syrian government officials (including Assad and his wife), to equipment, arms and oil embargoes, bans on commercial banks, flights to and from Syria, mineral and phosphate importation, the purchase of gold and diamonds, investment in the oil sector and the sale of luxury or dual use goods used for internal repression.

Among Syria's neighbors, Turkey has dealt crippling economic sanctions and levied a hefty 30 percent tax on goods from Syria. The Arab League and Organization of the Islamic Conference suspended Syria's membership. Lebanese President Michel Suleiman called on Hezbollah to pull its fighters out of Syria for the sake of regional stability. Tunisia even offered political asylum to Assad if the proposal would end the bloodshed.

And yet we have those terrifying pictures of whole families lying dead, no international consensus that Assad's regime must go – and no solution near to hand that could stop the killing on all sides and provide a structure in which peace could be rebuilt.

What R2P has certainly not altered are the politics of power. No global consensus or U.N. resolution can change the fact that a ruler holds immense power over his subjects. We don't know how to stop determined leaders from committing mass killings. No government sees ending mass atrocities as a priority that supercedes national interests.

R2P in itself is not enough to impel states to take actions that will be costly in lives, money, or reputation in situations where they don't see their interests as demanding it or where any heightened action endangers national interests.

We seem, in Syria, to be nearing a phase at which Western governments judge a combination of security, geopolitical and humanitarian interests to be crossing the threshold for military action. Many of R2P's supporters hoped that the norm would create an avenue for humanitarian action that was not “tainted” by power and security politics.

If failing to change the nature of international politics means R2P has failed, then it failed. But if succeeding in putting in front of every U.N. member evidence that no one challenges as to the number of civilian deaths (if not how they died) and keeping international representatives engaged and reporting back through the worst carnage, then R2P has succeeded. If the point of comparison is not Bosnia but Rwanda, then R2P has succeeded for its sponsors even as we,

the international community, fail the civilian victims – no one can say, this time, that they didn't know.

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