

## Mike Abramowitz, Washington Post: Does the United States have a 'responsibility to protect' the Syrian people?

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It's the foreign policy doctrine that sounds like a Star Wars droid. It's the argument that a former supreme commander of NATO, Adm. James Stavridis,

[thinks](#);

could be a basis for military action against Syria. And it's the idea that Washington Post columnist George Will

[argues](#);

by no means justifies a U.S. strike.

The "responsibility to protect" — known in international-relations circles as R2P — is a straightforward, if often misunderstood, notion: Nations must protect their citizens from genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing, and must take action to help other nations whose governments can't or won't protect their peoples.

It's hard to see how R2P would not apply in the case of Syria, where more than 100,000 people have been killed, 5 million displaced from their homes, 2 million refugees sent fleeing and numerous war crimes and crimes against humanity committed, including with

[chemical weapons](#)

, according to independent human rights monitors and the United Nations. A

[recent study](#)

for the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum concluded that genocidal violence against Christian, Sunni, Alawite and other groups is possible if the conflict escalates.

Yet there is one person who has studiously avoided invoking R2P: President Obama. When making the case for airstrikes, he has stressed the need to enforce the worldwide ban on the use and production of chemical weapons. "When there's a breach this brazen of a norm this important, and the international community is paralyzed and frozen and doesn't act, then that norm begins to unravel," Obama warned in a Friday news conference at

[the G-20 summit](#)

in St. Petersburg.

Yet the chemical weapons ban is not the only international norm at stake in the Syrian civil war. Although the U.S. government has endorsed R2P — most recently in the president's

[2010 National Security Strategy](#)

— U.S. officials appear unenthusiastic about invoking it as a rationale for combating mass

murder and atrocities. While the Syrian conflict has grown in scale and intensity, Obama and his aides have not used “responsibility to protect” to rally the international community to help civilians.

Of course, R2P is not the only tool the administration has to address genocide and other mass atrocities. Officials say their policy is to work aggressively to stop such crimes, though not necessarily through the prism of R2P. (...)

The Obama administration’s apparent distancing from R2P speaks to the tremendous challenge of mobilizing Americans — whether politicians or the public — to support action on humanitarian grounds. Saving lives is a hard sell these days.

Developed in the early part of the last decade, after the genocide in Rwanda and the failed efforts to prevent massive violence in the Balkans, R2P was supposed to help bypass the idea that has blocked effective action against genocide since the Holocaust: that state sovereignty prohibits countries from meddling in others’ internal affairs.

Adopted by U.N. member states (including Syria) at the 2005 World Summit in New York, R2P places the onus for protecting civilians on governments themselves; only if they fail to protect their own civilians — or even worse, if they attack them — should the international community step in. Even then, military action is supposed to be a last resort, and only after approval by the U.N. Security Council.

There have been reasonable criticisms of R2P. It does little to address the roadblocks in the Security Council that have often impeded effective action against countries perpetrating atrocities. Nations in the developing world complain that it is a cover for regime change by Western countries, such as in Libya.

But R2P has been a useful frame for focusing diplomacy and peace-building efforts in a number of countries at risk of horrific violence against civilians. In Kenya, for example, the United Nations and some governments used R2P as a rallying cry for their work, along with Kenyans themselves, to prevent the violence that some expected after this year’s presidential elections. Similarly, in 2011, as South Sudan prepared for its historic referendum and ultimate separation from Khartoum after a devastating 23-year civil war, R2P’s preventive powers were brought into high relief. An international coalition — including such unlikely allies as Russia, China, Norway, the Arab League, the African Union and the United States — “flooded the zone” with preventive diplomacy, expanded peacekeeping mandates and used high-level political involvement to ensure that the separation did not ignite new bouts of violence.

However unpopular or unknown R2P might be in the United States, it has emerged as a preferred vehicle in other parts of the world for mobilizing support for action against potential mass atrocities. Even China and Russia have endorsed the concept, and in the case of Libya, they allowed an intervention justified in the name of R2P to go forward. It is usually in the hardest, most extreme cases, such as Syria — where it is too late for prevention and diplomatic efforts have not deterred the regime from slaughtering its citizens — that R2P has failed to erase the polarizing debates over military intervention.

(...) Another possible drawback to R2P is the erroneous perception that it requires a military deployment or other steps that Americans may not believe are in the national interest. R2P contemplates a range of preventive moves intended to forestall the need for military force. If properly working, it should be a stimulus for international action, not a straightjacket.

Ironically, the U.S. government has initiatives that could improve its capacity to implement R2P. The intelligence community recently completed its first-ever National Intelligence Estimate on mass atrocities, a document that should focus policymakers' attention on countries at risk of genocide or crimes against humanity. The Pentagon has created a planning doctrine on how to respond to mass atrocities, and such outposts as the U.S. Africa Command now routinely include atrocity-prevention missions in their scenario planning. A new White House-led

[Atrocities Prevention Board](#)

, while hectored by some for appearing feckless in the face of violence in Sudan and Congo, is highlighting the need for new tools for nonmilitary prevention and response, such as a global sanctions system that would target perpetrators and could lessen the need for military action.

At its core, R2P works best in prevention. If the world had thought of Syria as an R2P problem two years ago, when only a handful of protesters had been shot dead by the Assad regime, we might have brought much greater financial, legal and diplomatic tools to bear and been in much better shape than we are today, facing only unpalatable options for halting the slaughter. Americans' understandable reluctance to get involved in more military actions abroad makes it imperative that such tools be further developed. Our best chance to rid the world of genocide and other forms of mass atrocity will be in trying to make sure they don't begin.

Read the [full article](#).