

Rethinking International Intervention

Written by Michael Aaronson

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MICHAEL AARONSON, MAR 19 2012

When the term “intervention” is used in the context of international crisis management people usually think of military intervention. That is a reflection of how narrow our view of intervention has become, in the context of the willingness of a generation of Western political leaders to launch military expeditions in far-off countries in response to threats of different kinds. Other, less coercive, forms of intervention such as diplomacy or mediation have been relatively neglected by politicians and academics alike. However the emphasis on coercive intervention, backed up by Chapter VII Resolutions in the Security Council, reflects a very Western-centric world view. While the Libyan case might appear to vindicate such an approach, that of Syria certainly does not.

Throughout the crisis the Assad regime has responded brutally to protests and shown little concern for human rights. Although crimes have also been committed by opposition forces, the independent report commissioned by the UN Human Rights Council is clear where the bulk of the blame lies. In response Western and some Arab leaders have called for Assad to go, and even the UN Secretary General has abandoned any attempt at neutrality. A significant humanitarian crisis has developed, with the Red Cross/ Red Crescent and other agencies denied access to sick and wounded people to provide emergency assistance. In the face of the regime’s intransigence and disagreement among the permanent members of the UN Security Council as to (a) who is to blame for the violence and (b) the justification for external intervention more generally the regime has so far been allowed to continue its repression of its own people with impunity. Attempts by the US, UK, and France to obtain a Security Council Resolution have so far been rebuffed by the Russians and the Chinese. Thus, unlike in the Libyan case, where condemnation of Gaddafi by Western and Arab leaders was followed by effective enforcement action authorised by UN SCRs 1970 and 1973, the strong words from Washington, London, and Doha have remained just that.

The deadlock among members of the international community has only now been loosened with the appointment of Kofi Annan as Joint Special Envoy to Syria of the UN and the Arab League. Arguably, Annan’s role has been as much to mediate between P5 members as between the Assad regime and its internal opponents. From the start he has highlighted the need for unity in the Security Council around an agenda which he has described as “to stop the violence, the human rights abuses and the killings and [to] get ... unimpeded access for humanitarian assistance to the needy and of course the all-important issue of a political process that will lead to a democratic Syria fulfilling the aspirations of the Syrian people.” Since Annan started work Russian statements on the situation have become notably more conciliatory and the Chinese have also publically backed his mission. At last there appears to be some prospect of leverage that will allow the humanitarian situation to be addressed.

So in spite of all the earlier statements from the Western and Arab powers arguing for regime change the most realistic prospect now is that of an internationally-supported accommodation between the regime and its opponents. The alternative is military assistance to the opposition and the prospect of a long and bloody civil war, with civilians paying the heaviest price. Why has it taken so long for this position to be reached? Given the well-known and long established political differences among P5 members with regards to coercive intervention – not to mention the closeness of Russia’s relationship with Syria and their resentment at the way NATO interpreted UN SCR 1973 to bring about regime change in Libya – it was a major failure of diplomacy by P5 members to allow themselves to lock horns in the way they did. It is all too easy to be wise after the event, but a more effective strategy would surely have been to concentrate on the imperative of allowing access for the ICRC and other relief agencies to the wounded and sick, while trying to encourage some form of political dialogue. In other words, rather than seeking to agree a political

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position on the rights and wrongs of the crisis the Security Council should have concentrated its efforts on persuading all parties to the conflict to respect international humanitarian and human rights law.

It is hard to escape the conclusion that an unrealistic mindset in some quarters about the nature, scope, and likelihood of success of international intervention – in this case an assumption that the threat of outside force could be used to influence the behaviour of a tyrannical regime – has hampered the international response to the current crisis. Western and some Arab leaders have rightly been concerned to address the appalling abuses of human rights and loss of life in Syria but in the absence of collective agreement to use the big stick there has – until the Annan mission, nearly a year after the crisis started – been no Plan B. If we are to intervene more effectively in future we need a more rounded view of “international intervention”: a better appreciation of the different tools available and a more realistic sense of what we as outsiders can hope to achieve. Building consensus around this in the Security Council – rather than blaming others because they take a different view to our own – would be a good place to start.

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Professor Sir Michael Aaronson was Director General (chief executive) of Save the Children UK from 1995-2005, and from 1988-1995 was the charity’s Overseas Director. He first joined Save the Children in 1969, spending two years as a relief worker in Nigeria after reading philosophy and psychology at St John’s College, Oxford. Between 1972 and 1988 he held various posts in the UK Diplomatic Service, serving in London, Paris, Lagos, and Rangoon. He is a founder member, and from 2001-2008 was Chair of the Board, of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, a Geneva-based private foundation working to improve the international response to conflict, in particular through independent mediation. Since January 2004 he has been a Visiting Fellow of Nuffield College, Oxford. In September 2008 he was appointed an Honorary Visiting Professor and in May 2011 a Professorial Research Fellow in the Department of Politics at the University of Surrey, where he is also Co-Director of cii – the Centre for International Intervention. He is a Senior Adviser to NATO, working on the political/military aspects of NATO transformation, and is an occasional lecturer at the UK Defence Academy on civil/military collaboration in conflict situations.