

Libya: The End of Intervention

Written by David Chandler

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DAVID CHANDLER, NOV 17 2011

During the Libyan bombing campaign, many commentators argued that we were witnessing the return of 'humanitarian intervention' and that Libya demonstrated that finally the 'Responsibility to Protect' had come of age. At the time I argued on e-IR (<http://www.e-ir.info/?p=8056>) that the context and discourses of intervention were very different from those of the 1990s, in which rights of intervention were posed as clashing with those of state sovereignty.

It is very important to grasp that Libya has been universally hailed as a success across academia and the media, precisely because it has none of the baggage of 1990s-style humanitarian interventions. In the 1990s, humanitarian interventions were tremendously problematic: they threatened to divide the international community; to undermine the standing of the United Nations and international law; and made Western powers responsible for the conduct of 'humanitarian wars' as well as for the liberal and transformative nature of their outcomes.

Back in the 1990s, humanitarian intervention was lauded by academic commentators as heralding a new global order of cosmopolitan law and human rights. We were told that this order would see the domestication of the anarchic global sphere. Liberal internationalists argued that the only barrier to this new liberal order was the recalcitrant elites seeking to hide behind the formal trappings of sovereignty. Sovereignty was to give way to a new international order and those states, which were unwilling or unable to protect the lives and rights of their citizens, were held to have ceded their sovereign responsibilities to the international community. The international assumption of these responsibilities led to the replacement of neutral international peacekeeping by the long-term engagements of peacebuilding and statebuilding, exemplified in the international protectorates of Bosnia and Kosovo.

In the world of international intervention, the UN, NATO and the EU took on the responsibilities of immanent global sovereigns in a world perceived to be on the verge of a global liberal order. This liberalising and universalising teleology reached its apogee from 1997 with the extension of international protectorate powers over Bosnia following the election of nationalist parties in the post-war elections and its closure with the publication of Roland Paris' *At War's End* in 2004. In this book, Paris proposed the need for extended international rule in order to achieve 'Institutionalization before Liberalization'. Paris argued that the road to liberal freedoms of democracy and the market could only come through international protectorates able to establish the institutional preconditions which would enable these freedoms to operate without destabilising these societies and reopening conflict. They could not be trusted with autonomy and the West was to take on the responsibilities of securing, democratising and developing these societies until they were capable of safely ruling themselves.

In the 'real' world, however, the discourses of intervention, of the teleology of global liberalism and the assumptions of Western global responsibility were already under challenge in the wake of the divisions caused by the Kosovo conflict. The interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq were much less 'liberal', with paid-up warlords and private security companies bearing the brunt of 'peacekeeping' on the ground and 'light footprint' international rule and rapid transitional governments, all too willing to hand responsibility back to internationally-engineered domestic regimes. Yet, even these interventions, legitimated under the rubric of the 'Global War on Terror', were bolstered by the tropes of humanitarian intervention: promising democracy; liberation for women; and the protection of human rights. There was still the assertion that the West was morally, even if not formally, responsible for their outcomes and for securing these societies in the future.

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These promises – of Western responsibility, of the spreading global liberal ideal, and of the freeing of Iraqi and Afghan people under Western tutelage – spectacularly failed to be delivered. Instead, it appeared that the ‘lessons learned’ from international intervention over the past two decades was that the global liberal order was not immanent, but rather that the world was as bifurcated as ever – not between a capitalist and a socialist world, but between a liberal and a non-liberal world. As the world became less liberal, so the discourses of liberal internationalism have been recast and rewritten. Whereas Roland Paris was half-right, in his view that they were unable to safely rule themselves, we have since discovered that he was half-wrong, in his assumption that the West had the capacity to direct and control a path to ‘enlightenment’ in a liberal internationalist teleology.

Without a liberal teleology, without a belief in an immanent liberal global order of harmony, law and human rights – without a belief in the transformative capacity of Western states – the right of intervention against the right of sovereignty no longer has any meaningful purchase. Today’s discourses of intervention therefore operate without a belief in the linearity of progress. There is no contraposition of sovereignty and intervention, no debate about the standing of international law or of the United Nations. We may have a global world instead of an internationalised one, but this is not a liberal world amenable to the interventions of an immanent global government exercising cosmopolitan rights. This is a complex, unstable world, where interventions are ad hoc and do not involve Western responsibility or transformative promise.[1]

Without Western responsibility for the outcome of the intervention in Libya and without any transformative promise, Western powers were strengthened morally and politically through their actions, whereas in Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq, they were humbled and often humiliated. Libya was an intervention freed from liberal internationalist baggage, where the West could gain vicarious credit and distance itself from any consequences. Even Bosnia’s former colonial governor, Lord Ashdown, has argued that we should learn our lessons and not be tempted to impose our version of liberal peace.[2] As British MP Rory Stewart astutely notes, if Libya was a success, it was because ‘it was hardly an intervention at all’.[3]

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[1] See for a good example, the recent Berghof Peace Support publication *The Non-Linearity of Peace Processes* <http://www.berghof-peacesupport.org/resources/books/>.

[2] *Times*, 26 August 2011 <http://www.zcommunications.org/lord-ashdown-and-libya-triumphalism-an-important-lesson-by-joe-emersberger>.

[3] *Guardian*, 8 October 2011 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/oct/08/libya-intervention-rory-stewart?INTCMP=SRCH>.

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