Ethnic Conflict and R2P

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The contemporary literature regarding state intervention and international crisis makes clear that the traditional concept of Westphalian sovereignty has been partially eroded by the end of the Cold War and the subsequent era of globalization. The multitude of failures by the international community to react to intra-state crisis during the last two decades have led to an increase in human security discourse. It was increasingly apparent that the state was not only a victim of human insecurity, but also at times its perpetrator. The international community has in turn adopted numerous preventative measures dealing with human security in an attempt to better combat the problem of intra-state conflict—a problem that has traditionally fallen outside of their jurisdiction.[1] Accordingly, it is important to understand the regional outcomes of state intervention as well as the character of intra-state conflict itself. Ethnic conflict is extremely prevalent within most intrastate conflicts and has been an important aspect of state interventions in the past. In fact, ethnic conflict has been internationalized, and has been "elevated to the domain of high politics, a realm previously occupied by international crisis, ideological conflict, and interstate war."[2] Along with ethnic conflict is a larger discussion of the role of identity in shaping and mobilizing intra-state conflicts. The role of ethnic identity as it relates to the security dilemma is also of paramount importance to combatting the problem of child soldiers in conflicts around the world. For this reason, an understanding of ethnic conflict and identity is important to a rich analysis of humanitarian intervention as both theory and praxis.

The principal debate regarding humanitarian intervention is whether the "protection of civilians from genocide and mass atrocities" can, in certain circumstances "trump the principle of non-intervention."[3] The attempt to reconcile this division resulted in the concept of R2P, and in 2005 a "compromised" version of R2P—R2P lite—was included in the final outcome document of the World Summit.[4] Aidan Hehir has argued that R2P has been hollowed out of any real praxis, and has evolved into nothing more than a popular "brand name."[5] The debate regarding R2P is not, however, confined solely to the principle of sovereignty, and the perceived right of nations to do whatever they wish with their citizens that follows such a principle. Hehir stresses this is not the case and that there was a discursive precedent of sovereignty as responsibility before the advent of R2P. The true potential of R2P is found not in the responsibility to prevent mass atrocities, but to react to them—halting and punishing the aggressors. After all, "covenants without the sword are but words,"[6] and preventative failure should not be met with inaction. For Hehir, the responsibility to react is where R2P is truly innovative; unfortunately, it is also where the most compromise has been made during this last decade of debate. This concern with prevention at the expense of developing a legitimate praxis of protection obscures our most prescient responsibility, to "protect those caught in the crosshairs of war."[7] For this reason, Hehir views contemporary humanitarian intervention as virtually unchanged from 20 years ago; the main obstacle continuing to be the lack of will to act.

What is it that makes humanitarian interventionist strategies so risky? In most cases of humanitarian intervention or calls for intervention, the conflict was perceived to be that of ethnic strife. This is in line with research arguing that there is a "positive connection between ethnic polarization and initiation of domestic conflict."[8] However, it is important to note that a plurality of ethnicities is not in itself a sufficient cause of conflict. Examples around the world remind us daily that pluralism is not in itself a recipe for disaster. The problem comes with the politicization of ethnicity and the exclusionary institutions and sectarian power structures that accompany it. The inability of a state to regulate the desires of ethnic groups within its borders can lead to formal inequalities being ingrained within the political and social fabric. When people are alienated from inclusive political avenues, they are susceptible to further polarization. The manifest inequalities of such states often breed strong identity politics, in which ethnicity is

appealed to just as much if not more than ideology or class. The fact that such categories often coincide serves to emphasise the mobilizing potential of ethnic militias and groups. For example, the strife in Bahrain during the Arab Spring has been projected as a sectarian conflict because of the corresponding polarity between the protesters and the elites—Shia against Sunni. However, This is an ascription of ethnicity in relation to larger regional narratives—Shia Iran backing the Shia Bahraini protestors, and the Saudi monarchy backing the Sunni elites—that takes precedence over the more discerning issues of political alienation, class antagonism and social justice.[9] Ethnic mobilization is a powerful tool for organizing and instrumenting an opposition movement, seeing as ethnicity is more easily definable than ideology. The old adage rears its head once again; correlation does not equal causation. Instead, "ethnic affinities constitute an organizational link in divided societies,"[10] and are thus often appealed to in the case of intrastate conflict—often over power.

Ethnic mobilization lends itself to an interpretation of corresponding conflicts using the concept of the security dilemma. When a rebel group mobilizes predominantly along ethnic lines it "implicates the entire group in the struggle."[11] This in turn making the entire ethnic group susceptible to systematic government oppression. These groups have "neither diplomats nor armies and therefore have to escalate their conflicts gradually through violence."[12] Such an escalation towards all encompassing ethnic conflict—in which combatants and fellow members of the same ethnic group are not distinguished from—can be disastrous, and can lead to members of ethnic groups joining rebel movements because they are the only form of protection available to them. Child soldiers are thought to enter non-state actor armed groups for similar reasons. Helen Brocklehurst writes that the "vast majority of child soldiers have joined voluntarily," and may enlist to "gain protection, shelter, food, 'family', and direction."[13] This can be explained in large part by the polarization of the *security dilemma*, as well as the appeal of ethnically mobilized groups in countries where other sorts of groups have been delegitimized.

Understanding ethnic conflict and mobilization as it relates to humanitarian intervention is critical because they so often coincide. The indeterminate threshold for humanitarian intervention is high—perhaps too high, seeing the number of mass atrocities carried out in the past 20 years. "States are often reluctant to get militarily involved in civil wars,"[14] and are more likely to intervene if there is an existential threat to the state itself. The aim of ethnically mobilized rebel groups is predominantly the dissolution of the government, and Kristine Eck posits that governmental conflicts have a higher risk for war than territorial conflicts.[15] The role of Humanitarian intervention is to stop mass atrocities and as such it is often necessary to combat the governments who commit these atrocities, effectively entering the conflict on the side of the rebels. Ethnically mobilized conflicts are "92 percent more likely to escalate to war" than are non-ethnically mobilized conflicts.[16] This suggests that opening the 'black box' of civil strife through humanitarian intervention often leads to indirect support for a certain ethnic group. Such an implication is an important by-product of intervention, and can lead to further ethnic strife between polarized groups with perceived foreign backers. Temporary allegiances can have strong implications for the intervening powers following the defeat of the aggressors. All of this makes intervention in the name of human security alone—although morally justifiable—an unlikely and risky prospect.

The international community was aware of the systematic atrocities of Rwanda and Bosnia among others as they were being committed. One can deduce that it was a lack of political will that held back meaningful intervention—not Westphalian fundamentalism. We may all agree that there is a moral imperative to halt mass atrocities. The problem is the reconciliation of such an obligation and our entrenched system of anarchy at the international level. Those states that are part of the United Nations should have a responsibility to respect the adoption of R2P principles, notably the moral imperative to *halt* mass atrocities and punish the perpetrators through the ICC. The system is what we make it, and human dignity should not be divisible by 193 states. The remaining challenge is how to successfully implement a praxis that can quickly and legitimately transform moral rhetoric into lives saved in conflict zones. This praxis of legitimated multilateral response is R2P's great strength as a concept and its great failure as a policy.

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[1] Aidan Hehir, “The Responsibility to Protect: ‘Sound and Fury Signifying Nothing’?” *International Relations* 218 (2010): 226.

[2] David Carment et al., “The Internationalization of Ethnic Conflict: State, Society, and Synthesis,” *International Studies Review* 11 (2009): 64.

[3] Alex J. Bellamy, “Humanitarian Intervention,” in *Security Studies*, ed. Alan Collins. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 359.

[4] Hehir, “The Responsibility to Protect,” 222.

[5] Ibid., 227.

[6] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 106.

[7] Hehir, “The Responsibility to Protect,” 226.

[8] Carment et al., “The Internationalization of Ethnic Conflict,” 66.

[9] Adrian Hamilton, “Bahrain’s uprising is about power not religion,” *The Independent*, March 17, 2011.

[10] Kristine Eck, “From Armed Conflict to War: Ethnic Mobilization and Conflict Intensification,” *International Studies Quarterly* 53 (2009): 373.

[11] Eck, “From Armed Conflict to War,” 374.

[12] Carment et al., “The Internationalization of Ethnic Conflict,” 71.

[13] Helen Brocklehurst, “Child Soldiers,” in *Security Studies*, ed. Alan Collins. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 452.

[14] Eck, “From Armed Conflict to War,” 380.

[15] Ibid., 380.

[16] Ibid., 384.

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