

Fighting Intervention or Fighting Imperialism?

Written by Tanzil Chowdhury

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TANZIL CHOWDHURY, AUG 4 2012

Progressives in the West find themselves in an existential conundrum. The agitation in the Arab World doesn't appear to be fitting the nice and neat dichotomy of working people rising up against a corrupt dictatorship that is in bed with Western interests.

But then again, it hardly does.

Remember, revolutions are always messy.

What if we have elements of the uprisings which are proxies for foreign interests? What if the government, for all their faults (indeed some very austere), remain stalwarts against far more damaging foreign interests in the region? Where do our allegiances lie; with the apparent people's collective will to bring down a government or the larger macro-battle to preserve sovereignty and defeat opportunities for imperial conquest?

The problem previously presented itself with the Iraq War. Ignoring all the fictions and misnomers about WMDs, we were presented with the archetypal tyrant by the West; ruthless and unforgiving. And adjacent to this, a homogenous oppressed people that yearned for outside intervention to break the shackles. We soon learned that this was not the case. There were those who were brutalised by the regime but had equal disdain for intervention; others who welcomed foreigners but soon realised their ulterior motives and a smaller contingent that supported reform. Now these were conjectures, something which could not be verified and thus it made it difficult to determine the heterogeneity of opinion amongst those being oppressed. How do we determine such and, having done that, which becomes the greater fight; against the enemy at home or the enemy abroad?

The first problem stems from opacity. The consensus from many people is what we hear from such conflicts can never really be determined. This results in a rather peculiar phenomena; consensus from all across the political spectrum is that freedom of press in much of the so-called underdeveloped world is at best unreliable. But what is unusual, however, is reliance upon this absent freedom when determining events. This naturally fuels pseudo-authoritative statements about the nature of the aggressors without being sensitive to the age old chicken-egg syndrome that is synonymous with conflicts of the aggressor-victim paradigm; who initiated the belligerency and/or was it pre-emptive?

We can never really know what is going on there and reliance upon intelligence should always but treated with meticulous scepticism if Iraq is anything to go by. We have to ask ourselves then, how can interventionism be justified on such a lethargic basis.

In discussing such issues, it is worth ascertaining what virtues are relevant and thus important. Two fairly uncontroversial virtues would naturally include the following. Firstly, that of self-determination; to put succinctly, the right of a people to determine their future and how they should arrive at it. Secondly, sovereignty; something which we hold as a peremptory norm here in the West, the undeniable integrity of a nation's ability to determine its own affairs. You can see that the two are linked and they present very strong arguments against interventionist pursuits.

How is this relevant to the initial inquisition? When looking at such situations, we have to ask ourselves some pretty

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tough questions and to try to formulate something resembling an answer.

Let us look at Syria.

Things are not great in the cradle of civilization. There is a government which appears to be forcefully stamping on dissenters through the loyalist sections of its army and its 'secret armed gangs', the Shabiha, are mercilessly clamping down on the rebellion. Death tolls, albeit frustratingly difficult to ratify,^[1] are as high as circa 19000.^[2] Contrast this with a disjointed rebellion made up of Army defectors, the politicians in the form of the Syrian National Council (SNC) and street fighters. The complexion of the fighters, interestingly not just from Syria, are united in a common will to overthrow the regime and for them, there is no negotiation.

The government contests that it is trying to protect the nation from 'armed terrorist gangs' and has articulated before that it is willing to enter into a dialogue with its opposition. We observe countless videos from state and foreign media, many which cannot be verified, of the government's army fighting someone- who, we cannot be certain, whether they are revolutionaries or reactionaries. The rebellion has risen up on the crest of the 'Arab Spring's' wave fighting against a government it says has continually oppressed them. However, reports emerge of prominent members of the SNC on the phone to Israeli generals^[3], some of whom are linked to elite and conservative American think tanks^[4] (and, in the tradition of this opacity problem, it has become known that the man responsible for the Syrian Human Rights Observatory, Rami Abdulrahman lives in Coventry, UK).

Indeed, Libya is also a case and point.^[5] Many progressives hastily supported the rebellion before learning about its own reactionary elements, their systematic lynching of black Libyans and now observe the vulnerability that the country sees itself drowning in.

One thing is certain- it is not all sunshine and roses.. One thing we can agree on is that before any of our 'Ivory Tower' dialogue continues, there has to be a cessation to the killing.

It may be apparent that I am conflating intervention with imperialism but I do so with very good reason. Indeed, when it comes to intervention, there really is no such thing as a free lunch as the destructive long term effects of the 'shock doctrine' in Iraq and Afghanistan have all too vividly illustrated. What this analogy teaches us is that we can't really justify intervention based on the tenuousness and tumult of the evidence. Therefore, intervention without the requisite mandate becomes an imperialistic conquest (arguably even with a mandate it is but this is a discussion for another time). This is another argument to suggest that despite brutalisation from within, up to a certain level (a 'genocide' invokes international obligations) it does not justify intervention from without.

So we are locked between a very jagged rock and an unforgiving hard place. Naturally, we do not want conflicts to escalate to proportions which extol death figures which read like the bank balance of the bankers, but history has cruelly demonstrated that intervention creates a slow death for the people of those states. If we, as the progressives, hold the virtues of self-determination and sovereignty as principles with no derogations and, given that the stakes are incredibly high, we hold a high threshold of evidence to permit 'intervention', then our position can be none other than fighting against intervention, in spite of fights within our own borders.

This is particularly difficult for people in Britain and elsewhere in Europe and the US to comprehend for the exact reason that we never face these issues. Our borders have never been compromised by another state in recent history. Indeed, like every country, we do face internal problems, but unlike other countries, particularly in the Global South, we never face external threats. Sentiments toward fighting external enemies, real ones unlike ones with abstract concepts (i.e. the War on Terror), are simply experiences we have never had.

Now people will turn to me and say 'well does that mean you support tyrants like Assad and Qaddafi' and I would turn to them and respond, 'how dare you ask ME these questions.' Therein lies the problem- it is not my call. I am not from these areas. But often our problem is, not that we internationalise the problems as this comes from our innate sense of empathy, but that we internationalise the solutions. The people who should fight a repressive government that has violated the tacit consent to rule its people, and with arms if necessary, should be those who reside in its

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borders and we can only offer unconditional (particularly if this is logistical/practical) support. And so for places like Iraq, Libya and Syria, the greater foe is those from without so that they may fight themselves, the foe from within.

Piecing together a tapestry for progressive foreign policy is perhaps beyond the scope of this article, however, it identifies the inequities and inconsistencies in the virtues of certain principles namely self-determination and sovereignty. Such a policy would demand universality and rigour. It demands a rhetorical and, if needs be, logistical support (as with the Shia uprising in Iraq during the 1980s) for progressive forces which imbue these virtues and not those of imperialist interests. Otherwise we find ourselves in a quagmire inhabited by the 'liberal interventionists' and 'right-wing neo-cons.' Many progressives have unwittingly accepted the Arab Spring narrative in Syria. My position is not to outright reject it, for it is clear there are progressive elements in the rebellion, but to be reflective and sceptical. And it is because of this very scepticism, that 'intervention' cannot ever be justified.

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[1] Chris Spurlock, "Syria Death Toll: Opposition Estimates Double The Government's Figures" Huffington Post, April 2012 (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/04/04/syria-death-toll_n_1402877.html)

[2] Staff and Agencies, "Syrian death toll tops 19,000 say activists" Guardian, July 2012 (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jul/22/syria-death-toll-tops-19000>)

[3] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bEpbS2obNdo> "FSA- Israeli Connection: Spiritual Leader of FSA declares his complicity with Israel on Israeli TV"

[4] Charlie Skelton, "The Syrian Opposition: who's doing the talking" Guardian, July 2012 (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/jul/12/syrian-opposition-doing-the-talking>)

[5] Tanzil Chowdhury, "Libya's Curse of Black and White" Foreign Policy Journal, November 2011 (<http://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2011/11/05/libyas-curse-of-black-and-white/>)