

Syria and the Dawn of a New Era

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AIDAN HEHIR, FEB 23 2014

This article is part of E-IR's edited collection, Into the Eleventh Hour: R2P, Syria and Humanitarianism in Crisis.

As reflected in this volume, the crisis in Syria has led to a plethora of enquires and analyses into a diverse range of issues. In this contribution, I focus on what the crisis suggests about the evolution of the international system and specifically the current redistribution of power. I focus on the fate of five actors—the US, Russia, China, Saudi Arabia, and the UN—and argue that the evidence suggests an irresistible shift towards multipolarity has begun. While the use of analogies is perilous,[1] the argument presented here suggests that Syria may well come to be seen as akin to the Suez Crisis in 1956; a moment when a new, profound redistribution of power was manifest.

While the 2011 intervention in Libya contrasts with the response to Syria, certain features of the former continued to be factors in shaping the response to the latter, albeit with different results. In particular, the US appeared from the outset to be reluctant to intervene in 2011. The caution exercised—evident both in the secondary role the US played in pushing for intervention and its modest military involvement—was perhaps most obvious in the claim made by an Obama administration official that the US was “leading from behind.”[2] The final decision to intervene in Libya was, additionally, a result of the position adopted by the Arab League; indeed, Hillary Clinton described the League’s call for military action as having precipitated a “sea change” within Obama’s administration.[3] The matter was also put to the Security Council and, thus, had Moscow or Beijing been disinclined, the intervention would not have occurred. The contrast with the manner in which the US behaved in supporting military action against Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, and Iraq could hardly be greater.

In the wake of the intervention in Libya, effusive appraisals abounded which today look embarrassingly premature.[4] The response to Syria has been, by any estimation, a damning indictment of the existing mechanisms for responding to intra-state crises. The situation, as graphically described by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights,[5] is characterised by massive state-sponsored oppression, systematic human rights abuses, the emergence of a range of anti-government factions (including extremist elements), regional instability, and UN paralysis. This tragic confluence should not, however, be seen as a desperate aberration from the trajectory forged in 2011 in Libya. At its most fundamental, the response to Libya was a function of regional geopolitics and framed by an era where the US’s capacity and willingness to project power overseas is greatly diminished, and the power of Russia and China is greatly increased. While in Libya the US’s reluctance and diminished inability to use force was mitigated by France and the UK’s determination, the position of both the Arab League and the African Union, and the Russian and Chinese (at least initial) acquiescence, this perfect storm was absent in the case of Syria and, thus, the result was markedly different. But it would be a mistake to allow the differing outcomes to obscure the common determinants.

The US’s policy towards Syria has been far from robust, but rather marked by a series of warnings and threats which have ultimately failed to be realised. Russia and China, by contrast, have articulated and adhered to a consistent policy which, though of dubious ethical quality, has demonstrated their willingness to flex their growing international muscle. Russia and China have, of course, been consistently reluctant to support intervention in the post-Cold War era, but Syria suggests that today their recalcitrance carries more weight. Russia’s opposition to the intervention in Kosovo in 1999 was loud, but ultimately futile; with respects to Syria, however, Russia’s opposition has had far more traction. It is almost inconceivable that NATO would today launch a military intervention against one of Russia’s East European allies as they did in Kosovo in 1999, which is a testament to the new systemic configuration.

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The Arab League has also emerged as an actor which clearly has ambitions beyond financial security; its position on both Libya and Bahrain determined the outcome in both cases and demonstrated a flagrant preference for geopolitics over human rights. Saudi Arabia, in particular, has led this new aggressive disposition, leading the calls for intervention in Libya, sending troops into Bahrain to crush the protestors, and financing the opposition in Syria. The Saudi Monarchy's unprecedented decision to reject a seat at the Security Council also points to a more assertive foreign policy, as well, of course, as constituting a sobering dismissal of the UN's international standing. Indeed, the UN has much to worry about; throughout the crisis in Syria, the UN Secretary General has appeared as little more than a desperate spectator who has, at times, degraded the UN itself by virtue of his being routinely ignored when pleading with states to take action to stop the atrocities. In August 2012, the General Assembly formally condemned the Security Council for its response to the crises, graphically highlighting the UN's inability to forge consensus, while the inability of Kofi Annan and, later, Lakhdar Brahimi to lead the peace process demonstrated the perennial spectre of Great Power influence outweighing the UN's power.

The crisis in Syria has also, of course, been shaped by a number of other emerging powers, including Turkey, Iran, and South Africa, while Brazil's "Responsibility While Protecting," published in the wake of the Libyan intervention, evidenced a new assertiveness on the part of this emerging power and the end of the West's monopoly on human rights-orientated initiatives.

These machinations have profound implications for the future of human security and, specifically, the Responsibility to Protect (R2P); though vaunted in some circles as a "revolutionary principle"[6] and destined to "End Mass Atrocity Crimes Once and For All" in our lifetime,[7] R2P has proved impotent throughout the crisis in Syria and, indeed, of negligible influence in the decision to intervene in Libya.[8] If, as seems clearly to be the case, power is moving away from the West with states like Russia, China, and Saudi Arabia becoming more powerful and assertive, then, naturally, the fate of R2P is in some doubt.[9] The most important lesson to be gleaned from the tragedy of Syria is, thus, that a new era of multi-polarity has begun; one which will be characterised by the spectacle of divisive and competitive power politics which has contributed to the suffering of millions of innocents in Syria.

[1] Aidan Hehir, "The Impact of Analogical Reasoning on US Foreign Policy Towards Kosovo," *Journal of Peace Research* 43:1 (2006), 67-81.

[2] Simon Chesterman, "'Leading from Behind': The Responsibility to Protect, the Obama Doctrine, and Humanitarian Intervention after Libya," *Ethics & International Affairs* 25.3 (Fall 2011) 1-7. Accessed at http://www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/journal/25_3/roundtable/005.html (Jan. 14, 2014).

[3] Stephanie Condon, "Clinton: There's 'no way' United States will take unilateral action in Libya," *CBS News* (March 16, 2011. Accessed at <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/clinton-theres-no-way-united-states-will-take-unilateral-action-in-libya/> (Jan. 14, 2014).

[4] Gareth Evans, "Interview: The 'RtoP' Balance Sheet after Libya," (2 September 2011). Accessed at <http://www.gevans.org/speeches/speech448%20interview%20RtoP.html> (Jan. 14, 2014). Ramesh Thakur, "Has R2P Worked in Libya?" *Canberra Times* (19th September 2011). Ban Ki-Moon, "Remarks at Breakfast Roundtable with Foreign Ministers on 'The Responsibility to Protect: Responding to Imminent Threats of Mass Atrocities,'" UN News Centre (23 September 2011). Accessed at http://www.un.org/apps/news/infocus/speeches/search_full.asp?statID=1325 (Jan. 14, 2014).

[5] "UN implicates Bashar al-Assad in Syria war crimes," *BBC News* (2 December 2013). Accessed at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-25189834> (Jan. 14, 2014).

[6] Lee Feinstein, "Beyond Words: Building Will and Capacity to Prevent More Darfurs," *The Washington Post* (26 January 2007).

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- [7] Gareth Evans, *The Responsibility to Protect: Ending Mass Atrocity Crimes Once and For All* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2008).
- [8] Aidan Hehir, "The Permanence of Inconsistency: Libya, the security Council and the Responsibility to Protect" *International Security* 38/1 (2013), 137-159.
- [9] Aidan Hehir and Robert W. Murray, "Intervention in the Emerging Multipolar System: Why R2P will Miss the Unipolar Moment," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 6:4 (2012), 387-406.

About the author:

Dr Aidan Hehir is a Reader in International Relations at the University of Westminster. His research interests include humanitarian intervention, statebuilding in Kosovo, and the laws governing the use of force. He is the author/editor of ten books, the most recent being *Hollow Norms and the Responsibility to Protect* (Palgrave Macmillan). He has published widely in a number of academic journals including *International Security*, *The Journal of Peace Research*, *Ethics and International Affairs*, and *Cooperation and Conflict*. He is co-editor of the Routledge Intervention and Statebuilding book series.