Why the Bombing of Libya cannot Herald a Return to the 1990s Era of Humanitarian Intervention

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DAVID CHANDLER, APR 4 2011

Many international relations commentators are heralding the Western bombing of Libya as marking a return to the 1990s era of humanitarian intervention. The debate is largely over whether this return is to be welcomed or regretted. This short article seeks to suggest that as much as we may wish for a return of the moral or ethical understandings of the humanitarian interventionist 1990s, this is not a possibility.

Libya has rapidly become a new cause celebre in the humanitarian cannon, following US President Barak Obama's declaration that US-led military intervention was necessary to prevent a 'humanitarian catastrophe' and his comparison of the NATO bombing campaign with previous 'good wars' of humanitarian intervention in the 1990s. For many, this appeared to be a chance to erase the memories of the 'bad wars' of Afghanistan and Iraq and instead revive the moral high ground of the humanitarian intervention advocates' favourite military interventions: those in Bosnia and Kosovo, tiny states in the Balkans, who were bombed into peace and reconciliation and then international occupation in the mid- and late-1990s.

There are, of course, some superficial similarities to the Balkans interventions: particularly the superior air power and military strength which means that NATO can fight moral wars which are not real 'wars' due to the fact that the interveners face little risk to their own lives. But the peculiar thing about the discussion of military intervention in Libya is how far removed it is from the context of the 1990s when humanitarian intervention had a powerful moral dynamism.

In the 1990s, the debate around humanitarian intervention was over its ethics and its legality; in a world where international law was based on assumptions of the rights of sovereignty and non-intervention. The argument was posed that a new ethical global or cosmopolitan agenda was emerging vis-à-vis the old realist world based on the 'impunity' of sovereign state interests. Today there is much less at stake regarding humanitarian intervention. There are few 'principled' critics flagging up what is at stake in the denial of Libyan sovereignty, even in the context of a popular struggle to overthrow a dictatorial regime. Similarly, few commentators presume that the bombing of Libya is a prelude to a new, more moral, global order.

Instead, the debate over the bombing of Libya is a pragmatic, depoliticised and technical one. The critics, basing their views on the experience of Afghanistan and Iraq, wish to warn of the potential instability following any breakdown in order or vacuum of power with external intervention causing Gaddafi's overthrow. The supporters of military intervention instead suggest that their actions will facilitate a 'humanitarian' political settlement (if not regime change) without the instability and bloodshed which would be occasioned by Gaddafi's desire to cling on to power at all costs. Despite the columns of newsprint, there is very little at stake politically or conceptually in this debate over military intervention as a purely utilitarian calculation.

The real question is not whether the Libyan intervention is a humanitarian intervention or not but why it is that there seems so little at stake here, especially considering the fact that the debates over humanitarian intervention were key to shaping the discipline of international relations in the 1990s. Is this because the advocates of humanitarian intervention were right in envisaging a moral world beyond the contested realm of the international? Have the

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debates over a new ethical cosmopolitan world order been won without us fully realising or appreciating this shift? Considering the acceptance on all sides that Libya is an exception and that similar interventions – from the Ivory Coast to Bahrain – may be much less politically feasible, it seems not.

The bombing of Libya can be called a humanitarian intervention (despite the obvious idiocy and the ironies of external actors undertaking 'ethical' bombing in situations about which they know or care little). It seems that there is little geo-strategic or 'national interest' rationale to the bombing of Libya in any case. However, the most notable aspect of the context and terms of the debate over Libya is that they highlight how the meaning of 'humanitarian intervention' has been hollowed out. Humanitarian intervention was meaningful only in the 1990s as a way of ethically grounding a political and legal exception to an international world order based on the reciprocal relations of sovereignty and non-intervention. Intervention was only meaningful in distinction to sovereignty. Today we no longer have a conceptually meaningful understanding either of intervention or of sovereignty.

We can never return to the world of humanitarian intervention because that world was over by the end of the 1990s. It would be wrong to think that humanitarian intervention went into abeyance in the 2000s because we were too preoccupied with the 'bad wars' of the war on terror. Well before 9/11, the retreat had already been called and the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty had established the conception of the Responsibility to Protect, suggesting that the 'clash of rights' – those of intervention and of sovereignty – had been a product of misunderstanding.

In the decade that followed, humanitarian intervention was off the agenda as Western states sought to reinstaur the post-colonial sovereign state (although shorn of its 'Westphalian' sovereignty) as a regulatory barrier between Western domination of the international order and the instability caused by the inequities perpetuated through its reproduction. Western powers did not seek to claim global responsibility for dealing with the problems of the post–colonial world and needed to roll back from the interventionist claims of the 1990s; that they would assume responsibility for securing, developing and democratising the non-Western world.

The conceptual development of the Responsibility to Protect enabled a 'Third Way' approach to international regulation, between non-intervention (and the respect for state sovereignty) and international intervention (and the assuming of international sovereign responsibility). Instead, the line between external intervention and domestic sovereignty was blurred through the focus on the ethical (rather than legal) responsibility to protect, which denied any clash between the legal and political rights of intervention and sovereignty.

Proof of this was the rise and rise of international statebuilding, which operated on a polar opposite framework of understanding: that international intervention was necessary to build or to construct sovereign capacities. In a world in which intervention was now premised on the need to build sovereignty – to state-build – intervention and sovereignty had become synonyms rather than antonyms.

In today's world, the bombing of Libya cannot readily be grasped in the traditional terms of the state interests of *realpolitik* or of an emerging global cosmopolitanism of human security. It now seems clear that the 1990s were the highpoint of the discipline of international relations – with the political stakes of humanitarian intervention understood as posing the choice between two liberal worlds – the political and legal ordering either of the international or the global. In 2011, the debate over the 'humanitarian' bombing of Libya demonstrates that we have moved beyond the liberal political binaries of the international and the global.

This is humanitarian intervention but without the ethical/political/legal framework of meaning of the 1990s. The claim of the interveners does not derive from any global ethical assumption of duty or right (in fact, the bombing campaign has the state-based international legal sanction of the UN Security Council). More importantly, the Libya campaign does not present the 'humanitarian' bombing as an undermining or rolling back of state sovereignty. Instead it is posed in the post-humanitarian language of capacity-building and good governance, allegedly strengthening the Libyan state through enabling the forces for democracy (anyway, those supporting the disparate opposition forces) to strengthen their influence.

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The 'good wars' of humanitarian intervention versus state sovereignty of the 1990s ended in the international protectorates, still ongoing in Bosnia and Kosovo. NATO action in Libya may involve dropping 'humanitarian' bombs but there will be no assumption of Western responsibility for their outcome. In this respect, the bombing campaign much more resembles those of Afghanistan and Iraq – where there was similarly little strategic concern with what happened afterwards. While there is no chance of Libya recapturing the meaning of the 'good wars' of humanitarian intervention in the 1990s, there is still the possibility that international powers will be drawn into the sort of mess that was created by the 'bad wars' of Afghanistan and Iraq.

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David Chandler is Professor of International Relations at the University of Westminster, London. He is the editor of the Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding and has written widely in this area. His personal website is at http://davidchandler.org.

About the author:

David Chandler is Professor of International Relations at the University of Westminster, London. He edits the open access journal *Anthropocenes: Human, Inhuman, Posthuman*. His recent mongraphs include *Race in the Anthropocene: Coloniality, Disavowal and the Black Horizon* (with Farai Chipato, 2024); *The World as Abyss: The Caribbean and Critical Thought in the Anthropocene* (with Jonathan Pugh, 2023); *Anthropocene Islands: Entangled Worlds* (with Jonathan Pugh, 2021); *Becoming Indigenous: Governing Imaginaries in the Anthropocene* (with Julian Reid, 2019); and *Ontopolitics in the Anthropocene: An Introduction to Mapping, Sensing and Hacking* (2018).