

Conflict and Conflict Resolution: The Case of Syria

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Abstract

When the Syrian regime failed to protect its population, an intervention by the International Community would be deemed necessary according to the obligations set under the “Responsibility to Protect” norms. The intervention would have changed the nature of the war though not necessarily ended it. The Responsibility to Protect came about to address the dilemmas that powerful countries face when they decide to prevent war crimes and genocides. The crisis in Syria can be an example of how countries become hesitant to intervene when there is no foreseen direct threat or economic and geographical interest in the concerned country.

The Syrian Civil War

The case of the Syrian crisis is a modern civil conflict that evolved rapidly from peaceful demonstrations to a fight against an authoritarian regime (Richmond et al, 2016, p. 401). The Syrian civil war broke out in 2011 and left around 560,000 people dead. This conflict has displaced around 13 million Syrians, among whom 6.7 million left the country (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2020).

As the conflict had escalated, the international community was hesitant to interfere due to the fear of inflicting negative consequences rather than positive ones on the country (Chandler, 2017, p. 202). However, to understand and analyze a conflict, such as that of Syria, and the role of the international community in escalating or resolving this conflict and the humanitarian crisis, one can consider a concept such as that of the “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P), which will be tackled in the following section.

The Responsibility to Protect (R2P)

The concept of the “Responsibility to Protect” has first appeared on the scene as an idea introduced by the International Commission for Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) in 2001. The idea consisted of making a “shift” from the “right of intervention” to the “responsibility to protect” (Chandler, 2017, p. 75). The “right of intervention” on the one hand, “put the emphasis on the international interveners to justify and legitimise their actions,” while the “responsibility to protect” sought to avoid this ‘attention on the claims, rights and prerogatives of the potentially intervening states’” (ICISS, 2001a, p. 16, cited in Chandler, 2017, p. 75). This idea, therefore, became a norm in 2005 that many governments around the world sought to adopt (Bellamy, 2011, pp. 8-9). This means that the concept of R2P has come to prioritize individuals over states to ensure the states’ obligations to protect human rights and prevent mass killings (Richmond et al, 2016, p.188, 253). Nevertheless, the evolved norm of the R2P, on the one hand, was seen as revolving around the obligation to keep peace and prevent violence, which can be done through cooperation between states and non-state organizations, for instance (Bellamy, 2011, p. 8). An example of this case can be of preventing a genocide like that of the Assyrians in the 20th century.

On the other hand, the R2P concept can be conceived as a “response to the dilemmas of humanitarian intervention” (Bellamy, 2011, p. 8). The example of Rwanda can best describe a case where such a dilemma had hindered powerful states from intervening, and hence could not prevent the genocide of Rwandans (Richmond et al, 2016, p. 144).

Nonetheless, what marks the evolution of this norm in 2005 is the “strategy” and “tools” set by the United Nations in a form of three “pillars” to help prevent states’ potential “misuse” of the R2P concept. The first pillar highlights states’ obligations and responsibilities to protect individuals from “genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity” (United Nations, 2009, p. 1). The second pillar involves providing “assistance” by the international community to the concerned states in “exercising that responsibility” if they fail to do so (ibid). The third pillar revolves around “tak[ing] collective action” by the international community in a “timely and decisive manner’ ... in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations” in case the concerned state cannot protect its population (United Nations, 2009, p. 1-2).

This means that the R2P can be exploited by states in a way that can influence other states’ sovereignty negatively, as it could legitimize the use of force in cases where an intervention is unnecessary but taken as an excuse by a more powerful state. The criticism of the concept of R2P underlines primarily the issue of an “abuse” that could be exercised by greater powers (Bellamy, 2011, p. 19).

Analysis

When the civil war broke out in Syria, the Syrian regime did not hesitate to use military force to suppress the protests spread across the country. If we take the concept of R2P into account, the Syrian government can argue that it took responsibility to protect its population by waging war on ‘terror’, as it only considers rebels and other opposing groups as terrorists (The Guardian, 2011). However, if we look from the viewpoint of the international society, the Syrian government was depicted as a violent and criminal regime that has been killing its own people (Hubbard, 2018). This means that the international society should intervene in this case as the Syrian state has not only failed in protecting its citizens but has also intentionally committed crimes against its own people.

The first two years of the Syrian civil war have not marked any military intervention on part of the international community (BBC, 2019), despite the humanitarian crisis that necessitated an intervention. Some countries have expressed concern over the possibility of worsening the conflict rather than resolving it. The international society found itself in a dilemma of whether an intervention will worsen the conflict or not (Chandler, 2017, p. 202). However, one of the perceptions about the R2P is that it evolved as a “response to dilemmas of humanitarian intervention” (Bellamy, 2011, p. 8), as argued above. This means that an intervention in the case of Syria is necessary to prevent a similar scenario to that of Rwanda from happening.

The Syrian regime has already “failed” to protect its citizens in the eyes of the international community from the very first day the government bombed its population. From an R2P perspective, the international community should have intervened against the Syrian regime as it had been committing “crimes against humanity” against its own people, according to the opposition (Rhodes, 2018).

Therefore, we can argue that because the international community did not intervene to stop “war crimes” in Syria, it has caused the conflict to progress and escalate. For example, an intervention in Syria would have stopped the Syrian regime from conducting more atrocities against its own population. It would have probably changed the dynamics of this conflict. From a R2P perspective, the international community’s obligation is to intervene in the case of “genocides” and “war crimes” (United Nations, 2009, p. 1). Not intervening in Syria can be argued to have negatively affected the ongoing conflict in the country. This is because the Syrian regime could have considered the non-intervention as a green light to continue its military campaign against its own people.

However, as an intervention would have changed the dynamics in the Syrian conflict, it would not necessarily mean that it would have ended the conflict, whether now or in the future. Even if the international community intervened immediately and toppled the Syrian regime, there would be still a chance that extremist groups seize power. This might create a more complicated situation and further drive the country into the unknown and prolong the conflict.

In other words, using the R2P to explore the “causes, dynamics and/or the aftermath” of the Syrian conflict would yield different explanations. Taking the R2P into account offers the

assumption that countries' fear of the consequences of intervention renders them hesitant to react to a humanitarian crisis, despite the perception about the responsibility to protect in preventing future genocides. This would mean that the humanitarian reason is only part of the reason why countries intervene in most cases, and states' obligations might only come onto the scene if it is in their interests to intervene. This is seen when the US and its Arab allies first intervened in Syria when ISIS rose into power (BBC, 2019). The attack against ISIS cannot be explained as an R2P to prevent a humanitarian crisis. A possible reason for the attack is that these countries feared that an extremist organization like ISIS would expand further throughout the region, which would threaten their national security. This is also seen in the case of Russia's backing of the Syrian regime to protect its strategic naval base in the Middle East, as mentioned by Gardner (2012).

As a conclusion, the use of the R2P theory shows that the international community has been oblivious to its obligation to protect the population of Syria when the Syrian government "failed to do so," which could have been one of the reasons the war is still going on in the country. The lack of interest in replacing the Assad government, as it does not directly pose a threat to some of the concerned countries, could have contributed to a decision of non-intervention against the Syrian regime.

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