March Roundtable: Libya and the Responsibility to Protect, Introduction

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Abstract

An annotation of:

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Keywords

Human rights, Libya, United Nations, Responsibility to protect, Intervention

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Publication Statement

Libya and the Responsibility to Protect

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The UN Security Council Resolution 1973 on March 17 marks a historical event: the first military implementation of the doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) since world leaders adopted at the United Nations World Summit in 2005 the collective responsibility to respond in a timely and decisive manner when governments are manifestly failing to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and/or crimes against humanity. Libya will be remembered as the test case for R2P, the initial step in transforming a principled idea— protecting people from mass atrocities—into concrete international action.

This Roundtable focuses on the international responses to the crisis in Libya and how the events unfolded domestically and internationally since the uprising started in the city of Benghazi in mid-February. The starting point for the debate is Shadi Hamid's piece, written in the early stages of the Libyan conflict, in which he calls on the international community to promptly intervene to prevent further civilian casualties: "Aggressive international action is risky. But taking comfort in toothless denunciations of Qaddafi is riskier still. It is also a recipe for prolonged conflict. In the absence of alternatives, a responsibility to protect sometimes necessitates a responsibility to intervene. And, with the Libyan regime declaring, with unmistakable clarity, its intent to kill, the time for intervention is now."

Only a couple of weeks later, and with considerable speed considering the slow pace and difficulties of reaching international consensus on these issues, the international community resorted to R2P as a formula to justify its intervention in Libya. The UN Security Council authorized member states "to take all necessary measures (notwithstanding the previous arms embargo) to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, including Benghazi." The Resolution explicitly condemns "the gross and systematic violation of human rights, including arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances, torture and summary executions," and says the attacks against civilians "may amount to crimes against humanity" and pose a "threat to international peace and security." Most notably, this is the first UN-sanctioned combat operation since the 1991 Gulf War.

In a recent speech (March 28), US President Barack Obama explained his position largely in humanitarian terms and used the concept of responsibility to justify his decision to support such intervention: "To brush aside America's responsibility as a leader and—more profoundly—our responsibilities to our fellow human beings under such circumstances would have been a betrayal of who we are. Some nations may be able to turn a blind eye to atrocities in other countries. The United States of America is different. And as President, I refused to wait for the images of slaughter and mass graves before taking action."

Beyond the justifications for international action, the challenge today is to translate the remarkable international consensus reached within the Security Council into effective protection for the Libyan population. This month's Roundtable discusses the multiple challenges ahead.

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