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Abstract

An annotation of:

“Save Us from the Liberal Hawks” by David Rieff. Foreign Policy, February 13, 2012.

Keywords

Human rights, Syria, Sanctions, United Nations, Bashar al-Assad, Responsibility to protect, Humanitarian intervention

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Responding to Syria

Article under review: "[Save Us from the Liberal Hawks](#)" by David Rieff. *Foreign Policy*, February 13, 2012.

Violence continues to escalate in Syria, with an estimated 7,500 casualties having been inflicted since the regime launched a [crackdown on dissidents](#) almost a year ago. The international pressure to halt the atrocities committed by Bashar al-Assad's forces has included targeted sanctions imposed by the US, the European Union, and other countries; a travel ban on Assad's family and senior allies in government; a failed UN Security Council (UNSC) resolution condemning Assad's human rights abuses and calling for his resignation; and, more recently, a peace plan proposed by the United Nations Special Envoy, Kofi Annan. Despite these efforts, Assad's abuses against Syria's population continue, while the humanitarian crisis seems unstoppable. What should the international community and the United States do under these circumstances? What are the possible responses? This month's centrepiece, written by David Rieff and published by *Foreign Policy*, offers a straightforward response to these dilemmas in the article's own subtitle: "Syria's a tragedy. But it's not our problem."

According to Rieff, "liberal interventionist" officials and analysts are leading the United States into a very dangerous sequence of humanitarian wars: "Cry havoc and let slip the dogs of (humanitarian) war. That, at least, is what much of the U.S. policy elite seems to be pushing for these days in Syria." Rieff underscores that the risks of intervening in Syria are just too high: "What is taking place in Syria may have begun in part as a democratic insurrection, but it has become a low-level (at least for the moment) interconfessional civil war. The last time we got involved in one of those was in Iraq, whose principal legacies, however unintended, are almost certain to be increasing Iranian power and influence—and setting the stage for the disappearance of Christianity in one of its most ancient homelands. There is simply no reason to believe that things in Syria will turn out any better and at least some reason to assume that the result will be even worse."

The problem, in Rieff's view, is that so-called liberal interventionists are made overconfident by the international adoption of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), endorsed by UN members in 2005 and also supported by international human rights NGOs such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. Yet for Rieff, R2P is a morally risky doctrine and a threat to the legitimacy of the current international order. In a recent [op-ed in the New York Times](#), titled "R2P, R.I.P.", Rieff went as far as suggesting the death of R2P, claiming that the illegitimate way in which the UNSC mandate was implemented in Libya (blurring the lines between civilian protection and regime change) would make any similar intervention unlikely in the near future. The difficulties of acting in Syria today, then, would be partly a reflection of the way in which the NATO-led intervention was carried out in Libya.

Rieff's op-ed in the Times proved to be very controversial. Gareth Evans, a former member of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, and [one of the architects of R2P](#), was quick to respond: "It is only very rarely, even in the face of unarguable horrors being committed, that all the stars will align in favour of coercive military intervention. The 'balance of consequences' criterion will as often as not make clear that more harm than good would follow

the use of force. Sometimes diplomatic persuasion will work, as with Kofi Annan's mission to Kenya in 2008. More often, when prevention fails, we will simply have to rely on measures like targeted sanctions and threats of international criminal prosecution: Syria, like Darfur, may be such a case. What we should *not* do is throw up our hands, like David Rieff, and say it's all just too hard. The stakes are too high for that."

The contributors to this month's Roundtable position themselves within this debate, countering some of Rieff's views, but also offering some words of caution regarding how to move forward the debate on humanitarian protection in the future.

Claudia Fuentes Julio
Roundtable Editor