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Syrians Crushed Between Humanitarianism and Realism

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Syrians Crushed Between Humanitarianism and Realism

Abstract

With the UN High Commissioner for Refugees announcing early this year that the war in Syria may have claimed as many as 60,000 lives, two op-eds published late in 2012 usefully exemplify two contrasting frames that have thus far dominated international responses to the conflict—namely, the humanitarian frame and the geopolitical frame. Yet despite the apparent contrasts between these two frameworks, both reflect a similar contempt for the Syrian people and their right to self-determination. The humanitarian framing of the conflict emphasizes the scale of human suffering and the need to alleviate it, while the geopolitical frame accentuates political interests and international rivalries. Neither one prioritizes the needs and interests of the Syrian people. Let us review the two approaches in more depth.

Keywords

Human rights, Syria, United Nations, Refugees, Geopolitics, Responsibility to protect, International Criminal Court

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Syrians Crushed between Humanitarianism and Realism

by Philip Cunliffe

With the UN High Commissioner for Refugees announcing early this year that the war in Syria may have claimed as many as 60,000 lives, two op-eds published late in 2012 usefully exemplify two contrasting frames that have thus far dominated international responses to the conflict—namely, the humanitarian frame and the geopolitical frame. Yet despite the apparent contrasts between these two frameworks, both reflect a similar contempt for the Syrian people and their right to self-determination. The humanitarian framing of the conflict emphasizes the scale of human suffering and the need to alleviate it, while the geopolitical frame accentuates political interests and international rivalries. Neither one prioritizes the needs and interests of the Syrian people. Let us review the two approaches in more depth.

Condoleezza Rice, who was US Secretary of State during the early phase of the occupation and counter-insurgency campaign in neighboring Iraq, analyzes the Syrian conflict from the geopolitical point of view, i.e. how it affects regional rivalries. She argues in the *Washington Post* that it is the isolated and increasingly impoverished regime in Tehran that menaces the peace of the region, unsurprisingly ignoring the (very recent) history of outside imperial powers intervening in the Middle East. Apparently forgetting that it was the US invasion of Iraq that inadvertently flipped the regional balance of power in favor of Tehran, Rice chooses Syria as the battleground in which the US should mount a rearguard action against supposed Iranian expansionism—in effect, to recoup the strategic losses flowing from the disastrous US intervention in neighboring Iraq while she was in power.

Rice, to be sure, includes some liberal and humanitarian components in her battle plan for her proxy war: she wants to ensure that the newly unified Syrian opposition movement establishes an "inclusive" post-Assad regime, and she calls on Western powers to establish a no-fly zone over Syria to "protect the innocent." She claims that intervention in Syria is the last opportunity for Western powers to secure the long-term foundations for "tolerance, freedom...and democratic stability" in the region—in the same breath as she makes clear her commitment to defending the Gulf oil monarchies. Thus the overriding imperative of her argument is the need for control: control of the upheaval occasioned by the Arab Spring and control of its potential consequences. Freedom and democracy for Syria are mere afterthoughts to her desire for confrontation with Iran. Indeed, she clearly sees humanitarian measures such as a no-fly zone as a way of strengthening the West's ability to intervene in and control the conflict.

Rice therefore is more or less explicit in her lack of concern for the interests of ordinary Syrians, and her dim view of freedom in the region. While she claims that the civil war in Syria "may well be the last act in the story of the disintegration of the Middle East as we know it," the truth is that last act will not come until US power is evacuated from the region and the Gulf oil monarchies—the last nest of monarchist absolutism on the planet—are overthrown.

Simon Adams, executive director of the Global Center for the Responsibility to Protect, evinces more concern with the suffering in Syria. He articulates the humanitarian response to the conflict in a piece for the *New York Times*. But ultimately his interest in the plight of the Syrian people is

no less remote and haughty than that of Condoleezza Rice. However, instead of power play with Tehran in which the Syrians are to be the pawns, Adams' concern is not to expand freedom in the region but rather to extend his vision for a global legal and policing system.

Responding to the violence, Adams advocates action to curb mass atrocities by targeting international aid to specific rebel groups that will not carry out sectarian reprisals, while urging the extension of the writ of the International Criminal Court to encompass atrocities wrought both by the government and rebels. Adams downplays the significance of the political choices and ethnic rivalries involved in the conflict, insisting instead that the "real choice" in the Syrian war is "between action enabling further crimes against humanity to take place and action dedicated to ending impunity for such crimes once and for all." What he means by "real choice," of course, is the choice for the "international community"—not the choice confronting Syrians themselves.

With Adams' singular focus on crimes against humanity, the vast panorama of the Arab Spring falls away. The origins of the conflict in Syria, its national, regional, and international dynamics, and possible outcomes are all ignored. The choices between freedom and oppression, between accountable, democratic government and dictatorship, between secular and pluralistic societies and conservative, authoritarian ones are all denied. The long-term, grinding misery of dictatorship that generated the regional revolts in the first place is ignored in favor of demanding immediate reactions to crimes against humanity. The irony here is that if our yardstick is to be the prevention of mass atrocities, then the stable authoritarian governments that choked the Middle East before the regional revolts are perfectly acceptable: there had been no mass atrocities in Syria for decades until the revolutionary uprising. After all, dictatorships have the structures in place to maintain the kind of order that would meet the minimal security requirements of the "responsibility to protect" doctrine...until of course such dictatorships meet a revolutionary challenge of sufficient strength.

Such contradictions reveal the absurd logic of humanitarianism: Adams demands that impunity for mass atrocities come to an end, even as the Syrian rebels seek to put to an end Bashar al-Assad's rule of impunity. As naive and starry-eyed as Adams' hopes for international law might sound, it is worth reminding ourselves that his stated goal is not the old utopian one of abolishing war itself, or even of abolishing mass atrocities. Rather Adams is concerned to end "impunity" for crimes against humanity. While such a goal may seem superficially more practicable than that of abolishing war, it is ultimately far more absurd and perverse than any utopian dream of a world free from war. For what could it possibly mean to end impunity for such crimes without ending war itself?

The vision lying behind such demands could only be a world in which states would be judged not by the extent to which they followed the wishes of their people, but rather by the extent to which they succeeded in enforcing human security; a world in which dictators could not be overthrown by popular revolt, but only hauled off to remote international courts to be held to account by judges rather than electors; a world in which war could be waged with impunity—as long as you were able to afford precision weapons technology and had the means to drop aid packages on people after you had finished bombing them, and as long you had battalions of lawyers on hand to provide the necessary legal casuistry to approve targets and justify the

endless series of humanitarian crusades that would be needed to prevent mass atrocities from breaking out.

If the Syrian rebels fail to maintain the momentum of their fight against the Assad dictatorship, the more likely it is that the conflict will be sucked into the vortex of regional rivalries and ethnic sectarianism. If the Syrian opposition fighters wish to avoid their revolutionary uprising descending into such a conflict, so too should they seek to ensure that their country becomes neither a new battlefield for the US looking to reverse the losses of Iraq, nor an object of international law and humanitarian charity.

Philip Cunliffe is a lecturer in international conflict at the School of Politics and International Relations at the University of Kent, UK. He is currently working on a book examining the revival of humanitarian imperialism in response to the Arab Spring. He can be contacted at P.Cunliffe@kent.ac.uk.