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## Myths About Syria

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## Myths About Syria

### Abstract

In my contribution, I want to focus on five fallacious claims and arguments that have been presented about the conflict in Syria. (Please note that this piece was written in Dec 2012).

### Keywords

Human rights, Syria, Ethics, Humanitarian intervention, Responsibility to protect, Bashar al-Assad, Religious conflict, Political conflict

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## Myths about Syria

by James Pattison

In my contribution, I want to focus on five fallacious claims and arguments that have been presented about the conflict in Syria. (Please note that this piece was written in Dec 2012).

Myth One: Intervention in Syria would be currently morally justifiable.

Several [commentators](#) have called for intervention in Syria. Condoleezza Rice, in her piece, calls for the "US to act," although not for humanitarian reasons but rather to protect allies in the region. Her neoconservative rhetoric of defending freedom and enabling democratic stability is unnervingly familiar, relying on an overly simplistic reading of Middle Eastern politics.

To be fair, most commentators who advocate intervention present a more nuanced account. The worry with intervention, though, is not that there would be insufficient just cause for humanitarian intervention—under most accounts of the just cause necessary for humanitarian intervention to be permissible, Syria would meet it. Rather, the worry concerns the consequences of intervening and the unlikelihood of any intervention being effective, given, for instance, the apparent lack of support for intervention within Syria, the disunited opposition, and the fact that a UN Security Council mandate is very unlikely to be forthcoming. Any plausible account of the moral justifiability of humanitarian intervention takes very seriously the need to do more good than harm, which is commonly presented in terms of the Just War principles of proportionality or reasonable prospect of success.

Of course, things may change. The humanitarian crisis may become even more serious and the situation may become more amenable to intervention. But, as things currently stand, there is a strong risk that military intervention could make things even worse. As Marc Lynch has [argued](#), even the often-mooted no-fly zone could involve a significant number of airstrikes of Syria's defense systems in order to be established and could end up being a precursor to a more extensive intervention.

Myth Two: The fact that the international community has been unable to tackle the conflict in Syria shows that the responsibility to protect doctrine lacks any impact.

The suggestion here is that Syria shows that the responsibility to protect (RtoP) doctrine lacks real significance since it fails to compel states to act. Moreover, the argument runs, any potential impact that the RtoP had on prompting military intervention in Libya has since been lost after the criticism NATO received for allegedly going beyond its Security Council mandate.

There are several problems with this argument. To start with, it tends to view the RtoP simply as encompassing humanitarian intervention. Hence, if humanitarian intervention has not been undertaken, there has been no RtoP action. But, as has been widely discussed, the RtoP involves a range of military and non-military measures, and humanitarian intervention is only one measure. Moreover, military intervention may not occur for the simple reason that it would not be morally justifiable. The RtoP doctrine, according to the agreement at the 2005 UN World

Summit, requires the international community to undertake military intervention on a "case-by-case basis," and it is clear in this case that military intervention would not be justifiable.

My point, then, is that the lack of military intervention does not show that the RtoP has not had any impact. To be clear, [more could be done](#) by the major powers in terms of the RtoP. But RtoP advocates also admit that there will, at times, be difficult cases, where human rights violations are ongoing and there is not a clear path to tackle them. The human rights abuses in [Chechnya](#) and Tibet are obvious examples where the international community has not been able to respond fully. After all, the RtoP is only a norm—or, more precisely, a cluster of norms (with some at different stages of the norm cycle)—within an international system that lacks strong enforcement mechanisms. Norms alone cannot always be expected to lead to *full* compliance. There may be material factors linked to geopolitics or other norms that influence the case in question. But the fact that the RtoP cannot override *all* geopolitical concerns or other ideational factors *in every case* does not mean that it does not have *some* compliance pull.

Myth Three: The conflict in Syria is purely sectarian.

The conflict in Syria has been increasingly painted as one between Alawi, Christians, Sunnis, Kurds, and other religious groups. The violence is painted as a sectarian civil war. Rice highlights, for instance, religious allegiances and grievances across the Middle East in order to defend her claim that Syria is a powder keg for the rest of the region. Yet the conflict is [obviously more than a sectarian civil war](#). For one, the sectarian narrative differs from the earlier narrative of the conflict presented. This was of freedom-fighting rebels against the brutal government in the context of the Arab Spring. Both narratives, on their own, seem unduly simplistic: the conflict seems to be at the very least *both* a sectarian civil war and a rebellion against oppression, but probably much more complex than that (e.g., also a proxy war for regional powers).

The worry is that the sectarian narrative, which is increasingly dominating the public debates, may end up reproducing the sorts of mistakes made in Rwanda and the Balkans in the 1990s, Darfur in the 2000s, and elsewhere, where complex, multi-factual conflicts were understood in simplistic terms of ethnicity and religious affiliation, and which lead to injudicious policy responses. For instance, one more obvious implication of reading conflicts in simple sectarian terms can be that they are viewed as inevitable (e.g., there was always bound to be conflict between the various religious groups in Syria) and that the solution should be sectarian (e.g., the partition of the state into sectarian areas), ignoring the fact that the various groups have coexisted for decades previously.

Myth Four: Assad "must go."

This [claim](#) has been made by several Western powers. Although it may be obviously morally desirable for Assad to be replaced by a democratic, human rights-respecting leader, there are several problems with this argument. First, the insistence that Assad must go means that anything short of him going will be seen as failure. It backs the West into a position where a negotiated settlement with the Assad regime will be viewed as failing to achieve their set goals. Second, as has often been noted, the insistence that Assad must go may further entrench his position, since

he has little to negotiate for. Third, the rhetoric of Assad going by the West reinforces the view, often found amongst members of the Non-Aligned Movement, that the West is only really concerned with regime change, which can frustrate other efforts to strengthen norms surrounding humanitarian intervention and the RtoP.

Myth Five: The West should arm the rebels.

Further arming the rebels, [the argument goes](#), is a way of giving them a better fighting chance against the Assad regime, helping them to win their war and to protect themselves. The first problem with this argument is obvious and [has already been seen with the rebels that have been armed by Qatar and Saudi Arabia](#): the arms end up in the hands of the rebel groups who have morally problematic goals, such as religious extremists. Second, it shows an unduly optimistic faith in the utility of force. Even if the arms were successfully delivered to the more moderate rebel groups, the use of force by rebels can lead to the deaths of civilians, even if accidental, and do little by way of helping them to achieve their ends (even if legitimate). As the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, has [argued](#), "the provision of arms to the Syrian government and to its opponents is fueling the violence. Any further militarization of the conflict must be avoided at all costs." Third, it overlooks the broader problems with the transfer of arms and the reasons for attempting to limit the international arms trade. These include the difficulty of tracking arms after the end of the conflict, which can fuel further conflict and criminality, as well as the danger of setting problematic precedents and the loss of any moral authority (the West may not be able to object consistently to other states arming rebels in the future).

What should be done then in Syria? There is, I think, no panacea. All that can—and should—be done for now is continued political pressure on Syria, the rebels, and the key international actors to stop fighting and to take more care in avoiding civilian deaths.

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