

Collapse in Libya: The Death Rattle of the Responsibility to Protect

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Global Research, August 07, 2014

Region: [Middle East & North Africa, USA](#)

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights, US](#)
[NATO War Agenda](#)

Paternalism is rarely a pretty thing. In many cases, it is fair to say it is a downside grotesque feature of human relations. One person, or entity, extends a hand that does not so much help the individual in trouble as slap the person in question across a grieving face. When it comes to international relations, the image gets even uglier. Here, states can assert the ultimate entitlement to assert control over a regime, or a state, which has fallen foul of appropriate conventions. The modern dress code of the humanitarian interventionist is simple in its absurdity: the Responsibility to Protect.

Matthew Waxman^[1], writing for CNN World, writes to the tune of lamentation. “The 2011 international coalition intervention in Libya was supposed to be a step forward for the Responsibility to Protect doctrine – the notion that if a state fails to protect its citizens from mass atrocities, it becomes the international community’s responsibility to do so.” Then, a description of the bloody mess that has become the Libya of 2014 (a bit of face slapping rather than hand helping here). “Tragically, the current collapse of governance and bloody infighting among factional militias there will instead result in a step backwards for this important principle.”

It is good to see that Waxman is inhabiting a space of debate that is vaguely terrestrial by admitting that the 2011 attack on Libya by NATO-led forces did much to propel R2P to a grave. In a sense, it never left the morgue it was conceived in – the idea that humanitarian intervention had to be reshaped not as a case of violating sovereignty but undertaking an obligation to do good. Terrible things are always done by those who claim a duty to do so, notably if such a mission is seen as a noble one. It is particularly so when humanitarianism is jammed down the barrel of a gun, and unleashed with the full ferocity that only zeal commands.

Libya remains the true acid test of what went wrong, with the imperial sabre rattling that was only made to look good because of the philosophising treacle of French philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy. When a pampered philosopher mans the barricades with teenage lust, even from a distance, you know a cause is in trouble. It becomes even uglier with vague UN Security Council Resolutions such as UNSCR 1973, which speak about such nominally vacuous terms as protecting civilians while attempting regime change in the process. Civilians are the footnotes – the text lies in traditional power dynamics. While the illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003 is still whitewashed by a few caring fanatics as the product of a genuine humanitarian impulse, the role by the US, France and the UK in 2011 hardly stands up.

In the wake of the overthrow of Qaddafi’s regime, the militias are rejoicing in their killing

and policing of factional havens. An Islamic emirate has been declared in Benghazi. While factional fighting was initially limited to Benghazi, it has well and truly spread to Tripoli. According to Libya Body Count, an unfortunately grim choice of name, July this year saw 469 fatalities across the country. The UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL)[2] has gone so far as to claim that “mass crimes” have taken place in Tripoli and Benghazi. There are mutterings in Algeria and Egypt about intervention for another round of good old fashioned policing.

As of this writing, the health sector of the country is heading for total collapse. This is largely due to the terror that has seeped into the Filipino working population in the country. The Philippines on July 31st began evacuating 13,000[3] of its nationals after one of its workers was kidnapped and beheaded. As workers from the Philippines make up 60 per cent of the country’s hospital staff, with personnel from India coming in at 20 per cent, the situation is grave.

Dr. Naima al-Fitouri gave one truly dampening example. “Al-Joumhouria Hospital’s maternity ward is now facing an acute shortage of medical staff, with only five doctors, instead of 12, working at the night shift given the bad conditions at the hospital and despite the increased number of patients.” This is all the more severe for the fact that the hospital services much of eastern Libya.

Other countries have begun evacuating their citizens with urgency. The ship is sinking fast, and they know it. Given Libya’s rich history of using foreign labour in its industries, the situation is calamitous. Some 50,000 Egyptians have left. Tunisia has been getting busy trying to get its 60,000 or so nationals out of the country. Added to all this the fact that a million Libyans have already found their residence in Tunisia since 2011, and we have the true handiwork of the intervention. R2P, a crime by any other name.

Then comes the prize jewel – the country’s oil sector. While ISIS runs amok in Iraq, and a brief lull takes place in the Gaza slaughter house, Libya has seen the destruction of Tripoli’s airport and some of the most vicious fighting since 2011. Its oil production has not only petered out, but fallen, despite holding up in 2012 when it accounted for 10 per cent of oil exports to Europe’s Organisation for Economic Corporation and Development. From January to April 2014, that value of that share had fallen to a mere 3 per cent.[1] The number of barrels produced in 2014 will have declined by 400,000.

The onus has always been on advocates of such adventurist projects to show that knocking off a tyrant and railroading the development of an outlaw state has benefits that exceed that of internal solutions. The record is miserably bleak, and suggests that the R2P doctrine should be either scrapped, or stripped bare for what it really is: an attempt at good old invasion and intrusion in the affairs of another state. Inside every humanitarian is a criminal waiting to get out.

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Notes:

[1] <http://www.businessinsider.com.au/libyas-oil-sector-is-in-freefall-2014-8>

[1] <http://globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2014/08/05/what-libya-says-about-intervention/>

[2]

[http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/between-democracy-and-state-collapse-.-](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/between-democracy-and-state-collapse-.)

[3] http://www.zawya.com/story/Health_sector_collapses_in_Libya-ZAWYA20140807045130/

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