

Massacres That Matter: ‘Responsibility To Protect’ In Egypt, Libya And Syria

Part 1

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[Media Lens](#)

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

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The ‘responsibility to protect’ (R2P), [formulated](#) at the 2005 UN World Summit, is based on the idea that state sovereignty is not a right but a responsibility. Where offending states fail to live up to this responsibility by inflicting genocide, ethnic cleansing and other crimes against humanity on their own people, the international community has a responsibility to act. Economic sanctions and the use of military force can thus be employed as ‘humanitarian intervention’.

A second version of R2P, proposed by the [Gareth] Evans Commission, goes much further. It [authorises](#) ‘regional or sub-regional organisations’ such as Nato to determine their ‘area of jurisdiction’ and to act in cases where ‘the Security Council rejects a proposal or fails to deal with it in a reasonable time’.

Gareth Evans – described by the BBC as someone ‘who has championed the doctrine that the international community has a responsibility to protect civilians’ – has an interesting CV. John Pilger [wrote](#) in 2000:

‘One of the nauseating moments of the East Timor tragedy was in 1989, when Gareth Evans, the then Australian foreign minister, raised his champagne glass to his Indonesian equivalent, Ali Alatas, as they flew over the Timor Sea in an Australian aircraft, having signed the Timor Gap Treaty. Below them was the small country where a third of the population had died or been killed under Suharto.’

Pilger [added](#):

‘Thanks largely to Evans, Australia was the only western country formally to recognise Suharto’s genocidal conquest. The murderous Indonesian special forces known as Kopassus were trained in Australia. The prize, said Evans, was “zillions” of dollars.’

R2P is often described as an ‘emerging norm’ in international affairs. But as Noam Chomsky has [noted](#), Japan’s attack on Manchuria, Mussolini’s invasion of Ethiopia, and Hitler’s occupation of Czechoslovakia were ‘all accompanied by lofty rhetoric about the solemn responsibility to protect the suffering populations’. In fact, R2P has ‘been considered a norm as far back as we want to go’.

On March 18, 2011, the day before Nato launched its assault on Libya, the BBC [quoted](#) from a speech by prime minister David Cameron:

'On the 23rd February the UN Secretary General cited the reported nature and scale of attacks on civilians as "egregious violations of international and human rights law" and called on the government of Libya to "meet its responsibility to protect its people."'

Two weeks earlier, the BBC had published an [interview](#) with Gareth Evans, asking:

'Is there a clear-cut case for a "responsibility to protect" justification for intervention in Libya?'

Evans responded:

'Absolutely... The question now, of course, is whether a step further should be taken to go down the military path and I think, morally, the case is overwhelming.'

Two weeks later, on March 22, 2011, with Nato bombing underway, Jonathan Freedland [focused](#) in the Guardian on how 'in a global, interdependent world we have a "responsibility to protect" each other'. Freedland's article was titled:

'Though the risks are very real, the case for intervention remains strong - Not to respond to Gaddafi's chilling threats would leave us morally culpable, but action in Libya is fraught with danger'

One day later, the Guardian's former Middle East editor Brian Whitaker [wrote](#) under the title:

'The difference with Libya - Unlike Bahrain or Yemen, the scale and nature of the Gaddafi regime's actions have impelled the UN's "responsibility to protect."'

Whitaker examined the origins and development of R2P, concluding that it had at last borne fruit: 'it deserves to be recognised as an intervention based on principle and not as the "petro-imperialist" plot that Gaddafi claims it to be'.

The following day, also in the Guardian, Ian Williams [discussed](#) the origins and merits of R2P:

'Under those principles, as Brian Whitaker demonstrates, the Libyan operation emerges with great credibility. Gaddafi had been repeatedly warned to stop killing his own people, but carried on using heavier and heavier weapons...'

Like other liberal commentators, Williams caveated freely, noting concerns about flaws in R2P, about 'Washington's methods and motivations', and so on. But his conclusion was clear enough.

These articles were all published between March 22-24, 2011, shortly after Nato began its attacks. Whitaker referenced Freedland, Williams referenced Whitaker, an echo chamber in which three senior journalists all took seriously both R2P and the idea that the Libya 'intervention' was an example of the doctrine in action.

At the beginning of March, Timothy Garton Ash had also [written](#) in the Guardian on the application of R2P in Libya:

'To intervene or not to intervene? That is the question... I defy anyone to watch Gaddafi's planes attacking besieged towns and not accept that there is at least a

legitimate question whether outside powers should intervene in some way to prevent him killing more of his own people.'

Although 'unconvinced' that a no-fly zone would be 'justified - *at the time of writing*' (our emphasis), Garton Ash nevertheless asked:

'And do we not have some responsibility to protect the people who have risen against him, if only in the form of the no-fly zone supported by Libyans?'

In yet another Guardian piece the following week, Menzies Campbell, former leader of the Liberal Democrats, and Philippe Sands, professor of law at University College London, [commented](#):

'International law does not require the world to stand by and do nothing as civilians are massacred on the orders of Colonel Gaddafi...'

They added:

'It would be tragic for the Libyan people if the shadow of Iraq were to limit an emerging "responsibility to protect", the principle that in some circumstances the use of force may be justified to prevent the massive and systematic violation of fundamental human rights.'

The Guardian was not alone in tirelessly promoting R2P as a basis for a Western war in Libya. Also in March 2011, human rights barrister Geoffrey Robertson [asked](#) in the Independent:

'Will the world stand idly by once Colonel Gaddafi, a man utterly without mercy, starts to deliver on his threat to "fight to the last man and woman" - and, inferentially, to the last child?'

Robertson also discussed the origins and development of R2P, concluding:

'The duty to stop the mass murder of innocents, as best we can, has crystallised to make the use of force by Nato not merely "legitimate" but lawful.'

Ostensibly at the other end of the media 'spectrum', Matthew d'Ancona [wrote](#) of Libya in the Telegraph on March 27:

'It is surely a matter for quiet national pride that an Arab Srebrenica was prevented by a coalition in which Britain played an important part...'

D'Ancona added:

'"R2P" is being given a trial run in Libya, and the results of the experiment will have momentous consequences in the decades ahead.'

Clearly, in March 2011, readers were bombarded with commentary promoting R2P as a basis for Western military 'intervention' in Libya. As we have [discussed](#), many of the alleged horrors said to justify Nato's assault - Gaddafi's use of vicious foreign mercenaries and Viagra-fuelled mass rape, his planned massacre in Benghazi - were sheer invention. The [violent chaos](#) that has befallen Libya since Nato's war, however, is very real.

Some interesting questions arise. How did the same politicians and journalists respond to the overthrow of the democratically elected Egyptian government on July 3, 2013 by a military force trained, armed and supported by the United States? How did politics and media respond to the appalling and undisputed August 14 massacre of civilians by this same military? And how heavily did the much-loved R2P doctrine – allegedly rooted in ethics rather than realpolitik – feature in coverage of these crimes?

Comparing Obama on Libya, Syria And Egypt

According to the Egyptian Centre for Economic and Social Research, 1,295 Egyptians were [killed](#) between August 14-16, with 1,063 losing their lives on August 14 alone. The violence was one-sided, as the Guardian [reported](#):

‘But the central charges – that most Brotherhood supporters are violent, that their two huge protest camps were simply overgrown terrorist cells, and that their brutal suppression was justified and even restrained – are not supported by facts.’

To put the slaughter in perspective, 108 people were killed in the May 25, 2012 massacre in Houla, Syria, which was [instantly blamed](#) by the West on Syrian president Assad personally, leading to a storm of denunciations and calls for a Western military ‘response’.

So how does the US-UK political response compare on Libya, Syria and Egypt?

The Guardian quoted Obama’s view on Libya in an [article](#) entitled, ‘Obama throws the weight of the west behind freedom in the Middle East’:

‘While we cannot stop every injustice, there are circumstances that cut through our caution – when a leader is threatening to massacre his people and the international community is calling for action. That is why we stopped a massacre in Libya. And we will not relent until the people of Libya are protected, and the shadow of tyranny is lifted.’

With standard objectivity, the Guardian described this as ‘a stirring speech’, one that placed the US ‘unambiguously on the side of those fighting for freedom across the Middle East’.

How did this US commitment to human rights manifest itself in the aftermath of the vast massacre committed by the Egyptian military junta on August 14? Obama [commented](#):

‘We appreciate the complexity of the situation... After the military intervention [sic] several weeks ago, there remained a chance to pursue a democratic path. Instead we have seen a more dangerous path taken.’

‘The United States strongly condemns the steps that have been taken by Egypt’s interim government [sic] and security forces. We deplore violence against civilians. We support universal rights essential to human dignity, including the right to peaceful protest. We oppose the pursuit of marshal law.’

Obama cancelled joint military exercises but he did not even suspend the annual \$1.3 billion of aid to Egypt’s armed forces. Jen Psaki, a State Department spokeswoman, [commented](#):

‘This is a rocky road back to democracy. We continue to work at it.’

The New York Times [noted](#) that the \$1.3 billion in military aid 'is its main access to the kind of big-ticket, sophisticated weaponry that the Egyptian military loves'. Global Post [listed](#) the 10 biggest 'defence' contracts involving major US corporations like Lockheed Martin, Boeing, Raytheon and AgustaWestland.

Spencer Ackerman [wrote](#) in the Guardian:

'Perhaps the most mystifying thing about the cosmetic US response to Wednesday's massacre in Egypt is the reluctance for the US to use its massive aid leverage over Cairo's generals.'

This must indeed be 'mystifying' for journalists who believe that the United States is 'unambiguously on the side of those fighting for freedom'. Indifference to mass slaughter notwithstanding, Ackerman affirmed the happy truth:

'Paramount among US concerns was that the military not massacre Egyptian civilians.'

UK foreign secretary William Hague, who has tirelessly demanded war against Libya and Syria in response to crimes real, imagined and predicted, had [this](#) to say about the killing of many hundreds of civilians in Egypt:

'Our influence may be limited - it is a proudly independent country - and there may be years of turbulence in Egypt and other countries... We have to do our best to promote democratic institutions and political dialogue....'

Patrick Cockburn [supplied](#) a rare, honest summary of at least part of the ugly truth:

'For all their expressions of dismay at last week's bloodbath, the US and the EU states were so mute and mealy-mouthed about criticising the 3 July coup as to make clear that they prefer the military to the Brotherhood.'

This helps explain why the Lexis media database finds exactly two articles containing the words 'Egypt' and 'responsibility to protect', or 'R2P', since July 3. One is a single-sentence mention in passing in an Observer [editorial](#) focusing on Syria. Ironically, the other cites a statement issued by Egypt's interior ministry after the August 14 bloodbath:

'Upon the government's assignment to take necessary measures against the Rabaa and Nahda sit-ins, and out of national responsibility to protect citizens' security, the security forces have started to take necessary measures to disperse both sit-ins.' ('Voices from the violence,' Independent, August 15, 2013)

R2P is simply not an issue for the US-UK alliance in Egypt. But what is so striking is that R2P is simultaneously not an issue for the ostensibly objective and independent 'free press'.

Part 2 will follow shortly...

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