

## **Syria horror exposes West's inability to protect the innocent**

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Syria has vividly illustrated the problem with the UN's concept of "responsibility to protect", otherwise known as R2P.

The difficulty is that R2P deals with moral absolutes, when realpolitik deals in relativities.

So if the response to the massacre of more than 100 civilians in Houla, including many children, is a concerted campaign of the expulsion of Syrian diplomats by Western countries, then one needs to ask what the purpose is of having an international moral obligation that we only rarely invoke.

The Libyan intervention represented the high-water mark for R2P, but it was an anomaly. The country was bereft of friends, militarily weak, strategically insignificant, had a popular opposition that was appealing to the outside world, and was religiously, ethnically and geographically straightforward in regional terms; there can have been no better opportunity than Libya for R2P to have served as a demonstrator for the concept.

While the intervention was a success militarily, both Russia and China feel that what they signed up for and what they got were two different things. Their future support in the UN for such interventions is unlikely.

Syria presents a scenario that is more representative of future conflict: an autocratic and ruthless regime with powerful regional and international friends who value stability more than morality; a country with a complex sectarian, tribal and ethnic make-up that defies an easy solution, and an opposition that is fractured, lacks inclusiveness and has been accused of abuses by Human Rights Watch and the UN.

Morality in this environment is relative, not absolute. As a result, it is the innocents who pay the price while the international community looks on.

In reality, there is little that can be done. Assad has been careful to use air power sparingly during the rebellion so a no-fly zone is of little practical use. There is no stomach for initiatives such as humanitarian corridors, no-kill zones or the like as they are either open to abuse or require the presence of land forces. There is also the tricky question of UN authorisation, which Russia and China would almost certainly veto.

Australia has been a key proponent of the R2P concept.

Former foreign minister Gareth Evans was one of the architects of the ideal, while another former foreign minister, Kevin Rudd, invoked it when calling for Western intervention to save Benghazi from being overrun, and continued to invoke it until Tripoli fell.

Despite its promotion of the concept Australia has so far failed to find a way to encourage its practical implementation. It is an international responsibility to find a way of protecting civilians of course, but being one of R2P's biggest boosters means the same proponents of it in easier scenarios such as with Libya should be equally vocal in proposing how to implement it in complex times such as now.

There is no problem with R2P as a theoretical construct, but just as a policy without an implementation plan is of little practical utility, so R2P suffers from the rarity of its implementation.

The international community either has a responsibility to protect civilians or it doesn't. If it does, then there needs to be a mechanism for doing so that is implementable under all circumstances. If it doesn't, or can't, then this needs to be acknowledged and R2P put away as a good idea that was impractical, and crises dealt with on a case-by-case basis with humanitarian considerations uppermost in our minds.

Earlier this year, at an R2P conference in Bangkok, Foreign Minister Bob Carr said: "It is easy when talking about R2P to lapse into a language of lofty and abstract ideas."

When expelling the Syrian charge d'affaires on Tuesday night, he said: "We could not send a stronger message than the one we have already conveyed", and that Australians were "appalled" at seeing the bodies in Houla.

Being appalled and sending strong messages falls well short of exercising R2P. Then again, in the real world R2P is only a lofty and abstract idea.

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