

A Syrian intervention must be weighed against the costs

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It is easy to agree that the international community has a responsibility to intervene to protect innocent civilians from large-scale violence in Syria's escalating civil war. And it is easy to see that the chances of a diplomatic and political settlement to end the bloodshed are dwindling. So it seems increasingly clear the only way to fulfil our responsibility is through military intervention.

But it is much harder to decide what price the international community should be willing to pay to stop the violence. This is the question we face about Syria today. How do we balance the costs and risks of intervention against an unfolding tragedy?

Experienced people such as former foreign minister Gareth Evans, who did a lot to create the doctrine of an international responsibility to protect, clearly understood that intervention would not always be possible. They knew that the moral imperative to intervene would have to be weighed against the sheer practicalities of each specific situation.

Faced with appalling stories from Syria, however, these practicalities can quickly be forgotten. It can be easy to assume the West has the power and ability to intervene, and that if only the world's leaders had the moral sense and political courage to act accordingly, a solution could be found at a cost we could and should accept.

But this ignores the specific limitations to what military operations can do, and it also overestimates the broader dimensions of Western power. Even after the sobering lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan, we in the West still too easily assume that we have the strength — and especially the military strength — to shape the affairs of other countries as we wish.

This is simply not true. In some forms of military force the West has a clear preponderance, especially in air power. But there are real limits to what air power can do. Beyond those limits, there are no effective alternatives to putting land forces in on the ground, and in land forces the West is relatively weak.

It is especially weak in the kinds of land forces needed to control territories and populations as large as Syria's. That kind of intervention really would risk a rerun of Iraq and Afghanistan. Does the responsibility to protect require the West to take that route again?

So what could air power do? Think back to Libya last year. The original idea was for the international community to protect civilians and prevent the Gaddafi regime from using its air force by imposing a no-fly zone across the country.

But the no-fly zone itself was quite ineffective, because Gaddafi had no need to use his air force to target civilians: he had an army to do that. So it morphed into something very different — a sustained campaign of air strikes against Gaddafi's ground forces. That meant intervention was doing much more than protecting civilians. It was actively helping to topple Gaddafi.

The lessons for Syria are stark. First, in situations like this the responsibility to protect idea of "impartial intervention" is an illusion. The only way we can help stop civilians being killed is to help one side win the war.

Second, the only practicable way for the West to do that is by a sustained campaign of air strikes against Syria's armed forces. This might not be easy. Syria has an extensive air defence network based on Russian surface-to-air missiles which can be very formidable.

Third, an air campaign would not work quickly and it might make the war and killing more bitter, at least for a while. Moreover, it would not defeat President Bashar al-Assad by itself, but only make it easier for his opponents to defeat him.

Fourth, it would give the West no influence over what happened then — who takes over in Damascus if and when Assad goes, where they take Syria, and how they treat those who opposed them.

This leaves open the question which still lingers over the intervention in Libya: does the responsibility to protect entail an open-ended responsibility to reconstruct as well? If so, we have a problem, because the West has no capacity to shape Syria's trajectory after Assad.

In the heat of a crisis it is easy to ignore such long-term consequences in the drive to well-intentioned immediate action. But good intentions are no guarantee of good outcomes, and ill-considered interventions can often end up doing more harm than good.

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