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Abstract

An annotation of:

"The UN Security Council's Pro-Syrian 'Defiance Coalition' Crumbles". By Raghida Dergham. Huffington Post, August 2011.

Keywords

Human rights, Arab Spring, North Africa, Middle East, Syria, United Nations, Revolution

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"The Syrian Spring" and Human Rights

Article under review: "[The UN Security Council's Pro-Syrian 'Defiance Coalition' Crumbles](#)". By Raghida Dergham. *Huffington Post*, August 2011.

The Arab Spring began in North Africa in early 2011 and quickly proved to be contagious, spreading to the Levant and the Gulf. The train of the "Arab Awakening," as it is called by some commentators, began its journey in Tunisia and passed through Libya and Egypt in North Africa before arriving at the gates of Damascus in the Levant and the national squares of Bahrain and Yemen in the Gulf.

While the demands of the Arab street are similar (democracy and social justice) and the reactions of the Arab regimes have been also similar (massive human rights violations), the reaction of the international community was anything but consistent. The international community intervened militarily in Libya but only imposed sanctions on Syria and remained almost indifferent to human rights violations in Bahrain. This inconsistency in reacting to massive human rights violations in Syria, Bahrain, and Libya puts international humanitarian norms to a difficult test. It also raises important questions about the interplay between strategic interests and international human rights norms, as illustrated by the discussions on Syria and Libya in the UN Security Council.

Our September Roundtable addresses the August 3 UN Security Council Presidential Statement on Syria, in which the members of the UNSC condemn the Syrian authorities for widespread violation of human rights. In her *Huffington Post* column, Raghida Dergham interprets the UNSC Presidential Statement as "a radical change...in the stances taken by the international community, and by important and influential countries both in the Security Council and outside of it."

But for HRHW contributor Thomas Pegram, "the Security Council stance on Syria is not so much one of radical change [as Dergham claims], but rather one of continuity. In affirming a 'strong commitment to the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of Syria,' the Security Council perpetuates its inconsistent and underwhelming record of response to human rights crimes perpetrated by states against their own populations. If Libya is ultimately deemed a glimmer of hope for humanitarianism over power politics, Syria may well prove a defeat."

Addressing the reaction of the international community to the situation in Syria through the lens of liberal political theory, Claudia Heiss offers a different interpretation: "Behind the growing acceptance of the principle that countries and international organizations have a responsibility to protect civilians from mass atrocities there is a moral definition of basic solidarity between human beings. The civic republican concept of 'virtue,' often rejected as anachronistic, seems to be alive in the moral outrage shared by most of the world in the face of such a flagrant abuse of power."

Our contributors also address domestic consequences if the popular uprising succeeds in achieving regime change in Damascus. Colm Cambell, for example, addresses the status of minorities and women in the post-transition Syria. "It is almost certain that the new democracies

will not be liberal. And there is a real risk that, rather than benefiting from pluralism, minorities and women may suffer. Realizing the risk, and curbing the enthusiasm, may help to focus attention on the architecture of a democracy that, while it may not be liberal, is nevertheless pluralist, and that creates a place for women that at the very least is better than was the case before the transition."

Theresa O'Donnell also warns against the extremely volatile and dangerous aftermath of revolutions. As she aptly puts it, "of course, it is important not to trade freedom for certainty and oppressive stability, but it should be remembered that while timidity is an artful enemy, caution is not. The romance of revolution is strong. The appeal of creating a brave new world where citizens do not live in fear, and are not routinely and unaccountably abused is absolutely irresistible. However, that is quite different from creating a world in which they will have to be extremely brave."

Our contributors provide a very interesting and enlightening discussion on the response of the international community to the popular uprising in Syria; the status of women, minorities, and human security in the post-transition Syria; as well as other important aspects of the Arab Spring, including the deterrence effects of prosecuting heads of states for human rights violations.

Raslan Ibrahim

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