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"Moral Ambivalence Is No Recipe for Engagement"

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Abstract

The bottom line is that the crisis in Syria is tragic and extremely complicated. Some of its more complex issues include the threat of ethnic conflict, refugee flows, Iran's regional influence, and the impact of this uprising on other protests in the Arab world, ongoing and in the future. However, there are also several incontrovertible facts: the regime of Bashar al-Assad, in the name of putting down a protest movement that turned violent, is responsible for at least 7,500 deaths and shows no signs of relenting.

Keywords

Human rights, Syria, Bashar al-Assad, Responsibility to protect, Humanitarian intervention, Policy

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"Moral Ambivalence is No Recipe for Engagement"

by Joel R. Pruce

The bottom line is that the crisis in Syria is tragic and extremely complicated. Some of its more complex issues include the threat of ethnic conflict, refugee flows, Iran's regional influence, and the impact of this uprising on other protests in the Arab world, ongoing and in the future. However, there are also several incontrovertible facts: the regime of Bashar al-Assad, in the name of putting down a protest movement that turned violent, is responsible for at least 7,500 deaths and shows no signs of relenting. As his armies advance on rebel strongholds through civilian populations, they have left carnage that reminds journalist [Paul Conroy](#) of Srebrenica and Rwanda. UN Humanitarian officer Valerie Amos describes what she has seen as [complete devastation](#). Currently, the enormous problem confronting the human rights community and international society at large is what to do: how to stop the onslaught, protect civilians, (maybe) usher Assad out of power, and oversee a transition. All these are matters of the tallest order. This being the case, it is all the more odd that David Rieff would respond to the crisis with such moral ambivalence, as he did in his piece in *Foreign Policy*.

Rieff came on the scene with his reportage from Bosnia and received high acclaim for the books that followed, [Slaughterhouse](#) and [A Bed for the Night](#), the latter of which was a wake-up call for scholars and practitioners of humanitarianism. Since the mid-1990s, he has turned a corner to become less of a critical gadfly and more of an outspoken critic of what he sees as human rights adventurism. From Kosovo and Afghanistan to Iraq and Libya, he lashes out at foreign military expeditions underwritten by moral claims, whether advocated by neo-conservatives or "liberal hawks." In this vein, Rieff sees normative advancements of the Responsibility to Protect doctrine (R2P) as a continuation of these humanitarian crusades in new terms. R2P provided institutional credence for the Libyan intervention, and is being appealed to again to defend Syrian civilians. For Rieff, however, this is just an excuse "to move one step closer to remaking the world in the image of the human rights movement." On the one hand, that anyone wants to remake Syria in the image of a constellation of NGOs, policymakers, journalists, and citizen activists (a.k.a., the human rights movement) is a bizarre thing to say; I assume he means the normative vision for the world that the human rights movement projects. A more pertinent point would have been to argue that intervening in Syria would necessitate a further redefinition of sovereignty as that which is inviolable only to the extent that the sovereign does not massacre its civilians, or that a post-Assad Syria is not an environment anyone is actually prepared to deal with (both of which are reasonable objections). R2P has many problems, most notably in the areas of implementation (what form the intervention takes and what it is tasked to do) and post-conflict transition, but Rieff unfortunately remains on a superficial level of rhetoric, with only passing connection to policy options.

Ultimately, Rieff aims his criticisms at those, like [Suzanne Nossel](#) and [Anne-Marie Slaughter](#), who are trying to rally support for action of some kind designed to protect civilians from Assad's armies, without presenting any alternative course of action of his own. Furthermore, it feels like he does not even believe that what is going on in Syria is worth our attention or problem-solving. The subtitle to the article reads, "Syria's a tragedy. But it's not our problem." A statement of this kind is not a critique of the operational downsides of R2P or the obstacles presented by Security Council approval, which are many. Instead Rieff suggests we look away and drop our moral

hang-ups, which are, apparently, really imperial fantasies. Rieff defends the no-vote of Russia and China, and supports Assad's claim that al-Qaeda fighters are among the rebel forces (which, truth or not, undercuts the protestors objective of seeing a brutal dictator unseated). While it is one thing to present reasonable, self-reflective commentary on human rights advocacy, there is a point at which such an approach provides defense to one's enemies rather than constructive criticism of one's allies. Rieff has never been aware of that distinction, nor concerned with it. I am not clear where Rieff stands vis-à-vis the human rights community, although it seems as if he is trying desperately to distance himself. He leaves us with a morally bankrupt non-policy toward Syria. Aside from the geopolitical and practical questions facing the international community, the moral ones are beyond opprobrium.

Joel R. Pruce is Lecturer in Human Rights at the Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver and served as Managing Editor of Human Rights & Human Welfare from 2007-2010.