



Libyan Lessons: Bring Back the Responsibility to Rebuild

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The 2011 Libyan intervention and the anarchy which ensued has highlighted an aspect of the responsibility to protect principle that has, to date, been overshadowed by the debates on the use of force; the responsibility to rebuild.

While the carnage in Syria has dominated policy agendas and newspaper headlines in the recent years, the aftermath of the 2011 Libyan intervention elicited much deserved attention following [Obama's candid review](#) of his foreign policy legacy and, more recently, the UK [Foreign Select Committee](#) report on the government's handling of the intervention. Obama openly accused David Cameron of having become 'distracted' over Libya and failing to follow through the military intervention. A similar accusation was levelled against Downing Street by the Foreign Select Committee report on Libya published in August that berated Cameron for having failed to develop a coherent plan for post-intervention Libya. This was evident in the fact that the UK government spending on reconstruction was less than half of its spending on the intervention, the report points out. The report argues further that the intervening governments, with particular focus on Britain and France as the leaders of the intervention, had a distinct responsibility to help to reconstruct the Libyan state. The failure to de-arm and de-mobilise fighters after the ousting of Gaddafi and the subsequent violence rendered the construction of political and economic institutions an impossible task. Indeed, Libya today has made little headway to becoming a stable state; fighting between militant factions and the emergence of ISIS have left many wondering whether civilians are better off today than they were under the Gaddafi regime.

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The intervention to protect civilians in Libya was hailed by some as an example of successful realisation of the ‘responsibility to protect’ principle that sets out the joint responsibility of states and the international community to protect civilians from so-called atrocity crimes (crimes against humanity, war crimes, genocide and ethnic cleansing). Where governments fail to do so, the international community has the responsibility to assume the duty to protect. The emergence of the principle in the late 1990s and early 2000s stirred much debate. While some rejected it as a thinly-veiled attempt by Western states to legitimize use of force for political purposes, others lauded the principle as a first step in finding consensus on the contentious issue of conducting humanitarian interventions. Libya, as is well-known now, provided few answers to those seeking clarification on issues pertaining to civilian protection and responsibility to protect.

As I have argued elsewhere, the Libyan intervention has highlighted an aspect of the responsibility to protect principle that has to date been overshadowed by the debates on the use of force; responsibility to rebuild. The responsibility to protect principle was first formulated by the Canadian government-sponsored International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS). The Commission famously argued in its 2001 [report](#) that state sovereignty was no longer an irrevocable right but a responsibility to protect populations from mass atrocities such as genocide and ethnic cleansing. In its initial formulation, responsibility to protect entailed three interlinked duties; to prevent, react and rebuild. While prevention of mass atrocities was the starting point for any government endorsing the principle, rebuilding societies in the aftermath of military interventions was seen to logically follow the ‘reactive’ pillar of the principle. The rebuilding pillar was seen to consist of providing security in post-intervention states, promoting reconciliation between former enemies and

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promoting economic development. These measures, it was argued, are crucial for stability and self-sustaining peace in societies targeted by protection interventions. One of the key aims of the principle was, in other words, to ensure that the need for protection intervention would not arise again as the capacity of domestic authorities to realise their protection responsibility would be augmented through rebuilding assistance.

This sequential conception of the principle was short-lived, however. While many Western governments were reluctant to commit to costly and often long-drawn out rebuilding missions, some in the Global South saw the notion of responsibility to rebuild as a throwback to imperialist foreign interference. In the light of these and other concerns, the R2P was refashioned along more statist lines; the rebuilding component was dropped from the framework and the responsibilities of states to protect their citizens were emphasised at the expense of the international community's obligation to protect. This was evident in the [2005 UN World Summit Outcome Document](#) where governments, for the first time, endorsed the R2P principle. This recalibration of the R2P was outlined in detail in the UN Secretary General's [report](#) on the responsibility to protect in 2009. It proposed a three-pronged understanding of the principle, centred on the states' responsibility to protect their citizens, the international commitment to capacity-building assistance and, finally, the international community's responsibility to protect. The rebuilding component was, again, notable in its absence; the principle was largely understood in terms of the preventative responsibility of governments. Although preventative and rebuilding measures overlap to a certain extent, lack of attention to specific rebuilding tasks, such as the provision of post-intervention security, was striking in the UN Secretary General's 2009 report and in those thereafter.

The Future of the Responsibility to Rebuild

The Libyan experience indicates that this change in the focus of the responsibility to protect has not been a matter of mere semantics. Although Libyans, eager to take charge of their own affairs after the fall of the Gaddafi regime, rejected plans for UN peacekeepers, they requested capacity-building assistance. Some assistance was provided by the intervening governments – for example the UK government’s [Security, Justice and Defence Programme](#) – but on the whole the immediate aftermath of the intervention was marked by the policy of disengagement as Libya observers have argued. The UN reconstruction strategy and donor government policies were premised on the emphasis of domestic ownership, coupled with references to the wealth of the Libyan state that could be utilised for the reconstruction process. It was not until emergence of the ISIS threat in the region that the Libyan authorities’ appeals for assistance gained attention in the Western capitals.

While it is of course impossible to state with certainty the effects that an alternative course of action (continued engagement in the rebuilding of Libya in the immediate aftermath of the intervention) could have had, it is not hard to see how the rebuilding measures outlined by the ICISS in its 2001 report may have helped to stabilise Libya. In the absence of the permission to dispatch peacekeepers, more extensive assistance to the Libyan authorities in providing day to day security after the intervention would have not gone amiss. Perhaps more importantly, concentrating international efforts and resources to supporting inter-communal reconciliation would have been vital, given that the precarious security situation in the country following the fall of the Gaddafi regime has been caused by the lack of political solution on how, and by whom, the country should be governed.

The instability and violence that has plagued Libya since the 2011 intervention suggest that if the aim of protection interventions is to generate self-sustaining peace rather than just carry out regime change operations, re-incorporating the rebuilding pillar into the current responsibility to protect framework is crucial. Doing so would not necessarily mean overhauling the entire principle: many of the measures regarded as ‘pillar II’ responsibilities provide the basis for incorporating rebuilding tasks into the framework. Pillar II, the commitment by the international community to assist the capacity and resilience-building in conflict-affected societies, refers to a range of measures such as fostering dialogue between communities and indigenous conflict resolution skills. Adding measures that address the short-term issues faced by societies in the wake of military interventions would strengthen the pillar and the framework as a whole. This would inevitably mean increased costs and commitment on behalf of those undertaking protection interventions, something that is likely to be deeply unpopular in the context of the lengthy engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as the increasing pressure on public spending. The alternative, however, as the refugee flows from Libya and the rise of ISIS in the country have shown, may mean having to face even more troublesome questions in the long run.

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