

Intervention on Humanitarian Grounds: A Scholarly Debate

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ABSTRACT

For decades, humanitarian intervention, defined as the use of military force by one or more states to prevent or stop widespread human rights violations, has sparked intense discussions and debates. Those in support of its claim that intervention is imperative to halt vulnerable populations from suffering defined atrocities such as genocide, ethnic cleansing, and other forms of war crimes. Critics, however, argue that such interventions violate state sovereignty, are politically motivated, and often result in negative consequences. This paper thoroughly examines the arguments on both sides of the debate, analyzing the various ethical, legal, and practical issues concerning humanitarian intervention. It also provides that while some instances can permit justification for morally motivated military action, the actual operationalization of such an action is politically biased, selectively applied, and risks deepening pre-existing conflict.

Keywords: *Intervention, Responsibility to Protect (R2P) Doctrine, State Sovereignty*

INTRODUCTION

As defined by Bellamy (2009), humanitarian intervention is the use of force by a country or coalition of countries to stop or prevent human rights violations in another country. The reasoning for such intervention is usually bound to the breach of genocidal acts, ethnic cleansing, or crimes against humanity where all are protected by Walzer's (2006) notion of 'just protective wars'. The idea of humanitarian intervention became popular after the Cold War due to the global community's helplessness towards the barbaric violence in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, and East Timor barbaric violence.

In the case of humanitarian intervention, there is a debate about whether the international society possesses the authority to intervene in the internal matters of independent countries, especially where human rights abuses are the rationale and justification for such intervention. State sovereignty, as articulated in the United Nations Charter, is commonly perceived to infringe on fundamental human rights norms and defies the moral obligation to defend people's dignity

(Bellamy, 2009). This paper presents the humanitarian intervention justifications theory and the critiques of the opposing it to balance the analysis of issues and ethical problems present.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND EVOLUTION OF HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION

Early Examples of Humanitarian Intervention

The Ottoman Empire's crises in the 19th Century are a good example of how European interventions were motivated, although interveners attempted to justify them by claiming those were moral imperatives (Heraclides & Dialla, 2015). The Greek War of Independence (1821-1830) is a great example of this phenomenon where Russia, Britain, and France entered the conflict using the Christian settlers under the Ottoman Empire narrative as justification (Brewer, 2011). All of Europe and Britain framed these events in a way that supported the notion that Christians were persecuted under Ottoman rule and needed intervention for their human rights to be exercised. None of these arguments came from a selfless position, and plenty of imperialistic motives guided them carefully disguised as civilization ones. The Ottomans were not seen favorably by France and Britain, who had their agenda in the region, and Britain, along with France, was more than happy to fuel the Russian ego to tackle the Ottomans (Greek Reporter, 2025). The Romanization policies undertaken by Russia towards the Southern Balkan states and Ottoman rivals, who were willing to increase their status on the world stage, could greatly benefit from the scenario. Although cited as an attempt for global peace to shape a more civilized order, the contestants of these interventions had very little scruples, which managed to obscure the European sense of morality. This has been criticized as it appears that humanitarian issues were often placed on the back burner to pursue political and economic interests (Axworthy, 2001).

The Cold War and Humanitarianism

Throughout the Cold War period, the international geopolitical landscape remarkably limited the possibility of large-scale humanitarian interventions. The United States and Soviet Union's ideological competition compelled the superpowers to safeguard their spheres of influence irrespective of attending to human rights issues (Wolfe, 2025). More often than not, this geopolitical contestation led to ignoring humanitarian disasters in several countries around the world. During this time, the international community's reaction towards the atrocities was framed with U.S. and Soviet bias for the sake of strategically aligned alliances and tended to overlook or rationalize the atrocities committed by allied governments. This created an absence of action taken in response to numerous mass atrocities (Le Monde, 2024). Take, for example, the genocidal rule of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, which went largely uncontained by the international community, as well as the Famine and political violence in Ethiopia and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan— all while a significant part of the population was suffering (Chomsky, 2007; Kuperman, 2008). These events showcase the assumption of humanitarian inaction during the Cold War as both superpowers wielded ideological control and geopolitical dominance at the cost of human rights (Chomsky, 2007).

Post-Cold War and the Rise of Humanitarian Intervention

Following the Cold War, the world order shifted drastically with an added focus on human rights along with the responsibility of the international community to prevent mass atrocities. The 1990s was an especially critical decade as several high-profile humanitarian crises highlighted the lack of an effective response from the international community to mass violence. Most strikingly, the Gulf War in 1991, the Rwandan Genocide in 1994, and the Bosnian War during the 1990s showcased the inadequacy of block diplomatic and war intervention where international actors were very slow or simply did not want to respond to considerable acute suffering (ICISS 2001). These highly tragic events fostered the need to rethink the intersection of state sovereignty and the protection of human rights. The now-known “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P) framework was formulated, which claimed that when a state fails to defend its citizens from mass atrocities, there is a moral and legal obligation in the international society to act, even if it means overstepping the sovereignty of the state (ICISS 2001). The shift aimed to resolve the contradictions between the defense of human rights and state sovereignty, but the actual application of the R2P has proven to be immensely complex and controversial in international relations (ICISS 2001).

THE CASE FOR HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION

Moral Justification: The Protection of Human Rights

The moral justification of humanitarian intervention originates from issues dealing with human life and human dignity. The central claim is that if a state does not protect its citizens from mass violence, including genocide, ethnic cleansing, and war crimes, it is the duty of the world to intervene and protect the most defenseless of people (Walzer, 2006). Infringing upon state sovereignty is, in fact, a detestable act, but in a situation where it is bound to save lives and protect the interests of thousands, it can be forgiven. Such actions, by definition, seek to prevent a far larger evil. In such instances, mild and soft interventions are always acceptable. For anything ‘intervention’ rather than aid, Walzer (2006) supports that fundamental human rights precede borders, territories, and sovereignty, largely when civilians would be in direct danger. Claiming sovereignty affords a state unqualified jurisdiction over everything within its boundaries is morally indefensible when it leads to atrocities or when governments stand idly by and do nothing to intervene (Hilpold, 2009). Such aid is usually provided by organizations like the United Nations (‘UN’) that have been hijacked to serve such higher purposes. These bodies have the will and the mandate to act for the good of those without the means to defend themselves. Therefore, the intervention ought to come from a consensus body that legitimately represents the concerned world. At this point, they must graciously abandon self-interest to actively end the evils born out of disinterest or lethargy (Bellamy, 2009).

The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) Doctrine

The "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P) doctrine was developed to address international indifference to genocide during the 1990s, most notably in the case of Rwanda and Bosnia (ICISS, 2001). R2P was introduced by The International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) in 2001. They claimed that sovereignty is not an unconditional right but comes with responsibilities. Under the R2P framework, every state is obliged to safeguard its citizens from genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. When such responsibility is abdicated—or worse, if the state becomes the perpetrator—the nation's community must intervene (ICISS, 2001). The principle underpinning R2P is that the global community bears collective responsibility to avert atrocities and, when necessary, to act—diplomatically, humanitatively, or militarily. This doctrine shifts the paradigm of State sovereignty, as it underscores the need for the international community to take action in cases where sovereign states commit or threaten to commit untold devastation (Evans, 2008). The application of R2P, however, remains controversial because it raises what some may call the 'how' and the 'when' questions of intervention, with the added dilemma of whether human rights abuse can be exacerbated in the name of providing humanitarian assistance due to political or military overreach (ICISS, 2001).

CASE STUDIES OF SUCCESSFUL INTERVENTIONS

The 1999 NATO Intervention in Kosovo

Though deeply contested for its legality and method, the 1999 NATO intervention in Kosovo is often highlighted as a poignant example of successful humanitarian intervention. Ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, a province within the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (then Serb-controlled), struggled for autonomy and faced brutal repression during the late 1990s. NATO launched an airstrike campaign against Serbian forces, compelled by the reports of grave humanitarian violence alongside ethnic Albanian displacement. The intervention was primarily motivated by the fear of large-scale massacres in Kosovo, especially after reports surfaced detailing Serbian military and paramilitary ethnic cleansing (Bellamy, 2009). Despite NATO not having received an official mandate from the UN Security Council, the alliance justified its actions on 'humanitarian intervention' pretexts, claiming that it is the moral duty of the civilized world to stop more violence. The bombing campaign effectively subdued violent conflict escalation, contributing to Serbian forces' rescind from Kosovo, which achieved an International Administration governed by the UN (United Nations Security Council, 2011). Even though the intervention managed to safeguard civilians, the enduring political ramifications for the area are still intricate, and the absence of a UN mandate has resulted in considerable controversy regarding the legitimacy of the intervention (Bellamy, 2009).

The 2011 Intervention in Libya

The NATO intervention in Libya in 2011 is an example of humanitarian intervention. During Gaddafi's rule, an anti-regime protest spiraled into violent clashes between the government and protestors. Mysteriously, Gaddafi's forces made their way to Benghazi, and the UN Security Council permitted military operations aimed at conserving the population using the R2P

doctrine. NATO forces later intervened, managing to prevent the mass slaughter of civilians and changing the tide of the conflict in favor of the anti-Gaddafi forces (Bellamy, 2009). The end of the regime in October 2011 was meant to be a step towards protecting civilians, reserving the principle of R2P, but comprised the post-intervention era. Libya was riddled with an unstable form of governance, internal wars, and the emergence of extremist organizations, which caused the critics to change their tune, blaming the annexation for a lack of control and further conflict. Despite the challenges, Bellamy's case study gives us an example unmatched by the intricacies of humanitarian intervention, where military engagement is debated for its merits, along with the obligations of global players post-concrete humanitarian objectives fulfillment (Bellamy, 2009).

THE CASE AGAINST HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION

Violation of State Sovereignty

One of the most severe ways of criticizing humanitarian intervention is that it indefeasibly violates the principle of state sovereignty, an important principle of international law embedded in the UN Charter. The Westphalia system describes the global order as one where states possess the autonomy to control their domestic policies and issue unbridled commandments, which have historically been vital for international order and stability (Walzer, 2006). To these critics, the humanitarian intervention violates this principle, and the state's sovereignty is breached. An external government taking control of a country's affairs by claiming to protect and aid the citizens violates boundaries set by the government and ethically responsible compassion, sully humanism disguised as benevolence. The violation of sovereignty—state control of one's territory and government—stirs the calm waters of the tangled web of international relations, making it susceptible to ominous winds (Kuperman, 2008). Such actions can undermine international relations' fragile structure, transforming adverse anomalous effects of sailing autonomy and turning norms devoid of hoist curtailing intercession control.

Selective and Politicized Interventions

The politicized nature of humanitarian interventions has also raised concerns, as they are selective. Powerful countries or coalitions have strategic interests in some crises while ignoring equally important ones. Their selectivity, however, undermines the legitimacy of these interventions and prompts questions surrounding the real motivations of the actions taken. Consider the case of Iraq in the 2003 War, which has often been painted as a 'humanitarian intervention' intended to remove Saddam and protect the Iraqi citizens. The intervention drew heavy scrutiny because it was argued that the motive leaned more towards geopolitical gain for oil and regional instability control rather than the intended human rights perspective (Chomsky, 2007). The intervention discrepancy, where some situations are acted upon while others are thoroughly brushed aside, demonstrates that humanitarian concerns are devoid of genuine intent and merely augments the political and economic interests of the intervenes. Moreover, this contributes to the narrative of double standards and erodes the international community's credibility regarding their neutral protection of human rights.

Unintended Consequences

In the context of international assistance, it is often the case that some actions—including military intervention—have humanitarian consequences that are paradoxically the opposite of those intended. The invasion of Iraq in 2003, for example, purportedly aimed to secure the well-being of the Iraqis by protecting them from Saddam Hussein's brutal rule—but caused severe destabilization of the country. The extreme violence that accompanied the removal of Hussein's regime created a power vacuum, which led to the rise of ISIS and even greater suffering for the Iraqi people (Chomsky, 2007). Similarly, NATO's 2011 intervention in Libya successfully curtailed the immediate violence against civilians; however, their intervention ultimately precipitated the breakdown of order and the onset of a protracted civil war that still plagues the country (Kuperman, 2008). The growing disorder in Libya highlighted the complexity of juxtaposing military force with humanitarian assistance. Such actions are often undertaken to establish peace and order, but instead, they elicit a new set of merciless realities that are entirely unable to resolve deep-rooted instability.

Challenges of Implementing Effective Interventions

Even with genuine concerns for humanitarian efforts, effective implementation poses a formidable challenge. Peace and stability during post-intervention phases are often the most difficult steps, as the intervening forces may not have the capacity, capabilities, or even the desire to create a sustainable, peaceful environment for an extended period. This was clear from the international peacekeeping forces' failures in controlling the situation in Somalia (1992) and Rwanda (1994) without triggering further violence. In Somalia, the UN-led intervention sought to foster stabilization and facilitate humanitarian assistance but was unable to achieve enduring peace due to perpetual civil strife, disarray among international actors, and gridlock of conflicting policies. Moreover, of course, there is the 1994 Rwandan Genocide, where nothing was done to prevent it or stop it until it was too late, which showcases international intervention lacking proper action in extreme situations such as that crisis. These cases demonstrate the difficulties in achieving successful humanitarian operations as the intervening forces have to deal with multi-layered local conflicts where constant security and stability become a paradox of time.

LEGAL FRAMEWORKS AND THE ROLE OF THE UNITED NATIONS

The UN Charter and the Legality of Humanitarian Intervention

According to the foundational document governing international law, the forces of any state may not be used except in defense of sovereign territorial integrity or self-defense as per the Security Council's authorization (Bellamy, 2009). This provision has been a source of intense dispute concerning the legality of interventions made in the name of humanity, for which no approval from the Security Council has been given. It is important to mention that both Kosovo (1999)

and Libya (2011) interventions were done without explicit sanction of the UN Security Council. Several legal scholars and international relations specialists regard these measures as breaches of the UN Charter, which aims to prevent unilateral military actions (Bellamy, 2009). Advocates of the 'Responsibility to Protect' doctrine (R2P), however, will contend that in the circumstance of mass atrocities, there is a legal and moral cause for the international community to intervene on behalf of civilians regardless of the Defense Cabinet's approval (ICISS, 2001). The contradiction comes from state sovereignty as defended by the UN Charter on one side, and humane intervention on the other side has been the core issue of debate regarding the legality of such actions.

The Role of the UN Security Council

Only the UN Security Council can authorize military provocations, which makes it the sole organ with the prerogative to sanction the use of violence in Law. The UN Security Council is important since it allows military force to be used. The use of force can be violence against human beings, material things of states, or any helpful destruction to prevent means. However, the ability of the five permanent members to use vetoes makes it hard for the international society to take action to solve the humanitarian issues. This was the case with the remainder of the permanent members wishing to act, but to do so owing to the absence of consensus was prevented by the existence of the Veto. Again, third-world countries have crises, in fact, due to the possession of advanced means of arms. Bear witness to this the lack of intervention in the case of the Rwandese Genocide, which covered within a short span of years 1994, and the Darfur tussle, which occurred in 2003 (Bellamy, 2009). A man came up with a proposition contrary to the existence of the assumed rule, saying that no veto citizen in the world does not want shelter. It leads me to conclude that the Security Council is ineffective in its core activities, which are addressed to a refugee in need of security in the year. In recent examples, politically motivated inaction leaves a large number of unprotected people exposed to violence, as has happened in the Syrian case. This shows and does away with the claim that the Security Council decides deliverance time.

Reform of the UN and International Law

Michael Axworthy (2001) and Michael Walzer (2006) have advocated for changes in the United Nations (UN) and international law, restructuring the framework for authorizing humanitarian interventions and appeals to the prevailing flaws in the system. These critiques pay particular attention to the political biases and rampant inefficiencies that prevent timely and effective action in the presence of mass atrocities. One of the proposals suggests curbing the veto power enjoyed by the five and the UN Security Council permanent members (China, France, Russia, the UK, and the USA) - a power that has repeatedly frozen any proactive responses to humanitarian aid crises. The veto system, created to facilitate agreement among the world's major powers, has been condemned for giving the veto power to any member who decides a proposed protective military intervention would not be retaking a necessary human rights-abusing intervention. Modifying this approach, as suggested by Axworthy (2001), would permit

military action without as much delay and enable humanitarian interventions to be conducted more legitimately.

Furthermore, some have argued that regional bodies such as the African Union (AU) and the European Union (EU) could be granted more power to respond to humanitarian intervention cases, especially when the Security Council is deadlocked due to political reasons. Advocates of this position, including Axworthy (2001), claim that regional organizations tend to have a greater capacity to manage conflicts in their region due to geography and local knowledge. For instance, the African Union has begun to undertake some peacekeeping operations like the ones in Sudan and Somalia, which shows the possibility of greater engagement in humanitarian intervention. However, there are also prerequisites for regional organizations to act; they would need clear operational mandates, resources, and international political support to provide credibility for their actions.

Another reform proposal discusses creating more definitive and coherent policies to curb politically motivated or selective humanitarian interventions. Critics like Noam Chomsky (2007) claim that "interventions" more often than not serve the strategic needs of some powerful state and do not show any interest in humanitarian efforts of aid; hence, they are accused of double standards. For example, some interventions in the Middle East have been driven mainly by geopolitical or economic factors, like gaining access to oil, as opposed to a commitment to defending human rights. In response to this, Walzer (2006) supports a proposal where the structure of humanitarian interventions is based on absolute universally accepted benchmarks which are deliberately designed to restrain the political, economic, and strategic interests of the placing states to ensure any action taken would be out of human rights concerns. Walzer argues that these prerequisites should include indisputable evidence of massive atrocities, the absence of state control and protection for citizens, and a reasonable expectation that the intervention would mitigatively prevent further harm. In his demeanor, Walzer argues that these reforms would strengthen global responsibility's credibility while enhancing the consideration and effectiveness of humanitarian interventions.

CONCLUSION

Intervention for humanitarian reasons is arguably one of the most complex and contentious issues in international relations. While the rationale to intervene and protect human rights is morally justified, the practical and legal hurdles accompanying such intervention are equally critical. Human rights intervention is fraught with enormous risks, including breaching state sovereignty, selective enforcement, and other unforeseen situational outcomes that can exacerbate the crises they intend to resolve.

We need to focus more on balancing the protection of human rights and state sovereignty. This balance may be achieved through the R2P (Responsibility to Protect) doctrine; however, its operationalization requires thorough attention to every intervention's politics, law, and practical

aspects. Most importantly, the international system needs to shift its focus toward strengthening multilateral institutions, developing mechanisms for conflict prevention, and guiding interventions based on verifiable ethical standards coupled with a commitment to human rights (Bellamy, 2009; ICISS, 2001).

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