

Forum: Disarmament Commission

Issue: The question of foreign intervention in the Middle East

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Introduction

The extent and reason for foreign interventions have always been a topic of debate. Whether a state is intervening solely on behalf of human welfare or for its own interests is a rather controversial question. Another question raised is whether intervention infringes upon national sovereignty. It can be argued that a degree of humanitarian intervention is needed at times, but on whose account? The use of military forces in humanitarian interventions often inflicts more harm than good. However, if an intervention is successful---do the ends justify the means? Does a threat to human rights justify the use of military force against the inflictor? Since the creation of the United Nations, the international community has had an obligation to end violations of human rights. Today, the international community has not yet found a way to balance the responsibility to protect the innocent with abstinence from violence and respect for national sovereignty.

The Middle East lies at the center of past and present foreign interventions. It is a hub of ethnic and religious tensions. Over the years, the tensions have escalated into full-scale wars in numerous Middle Eastern nations leading to foreign interventions. The foreign involvement primarily consists of bordering Middle Eastern countries supporting certain sides for geopolitical benefits, but nations outside of the Middle East have also intervened for the sake of economic benefits or on claims of humanitarian aid.

Definition of Key Terms

Middle East

The Middle East is a transcontinental region consisting of Egypt, Iran, Turkey, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Syria, Jordan, United Arab Emirates, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, and Qatar.

Foreign Intervention

Foreign intervention is the act of a nation involving itself in another nation's affairs. Foreign interventions primarily involve military interventions often conducted without the agreement of the specific country/region. A subcategory of foreign interventions is humanitarian interventions which is conducted by nations to preserve human welfare in nations in conflict.

Responsibility to Protect (R2P)

The Responsibility to Protect is defined by its three main pillars: “Pillar One: Every state has the Responsibility to Protect its populations from four mass atrocity crimes: genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing. Pillar Two: The wider international community has the responsibility to encourage and assist individual states in meeting that responsibility. Pillar Three: If a state is manifestly failing to protect its populations, the international community must be prepared to take appropriate collective action, in a timely and decisive manner and in accordance with the UN Charter.”

United Nations Charter

The UN Charter is the treaty on which the UN was founded on. The charter includes articles addressing the goals and limitations of the UN. The concept of state sovereignty, established by the UN Charter, is undermined by unilateral foreign interventions because of the lack of UN authorization.

Sovereignty

Sovereignty is a nation’s right to govern itself and maintain autonomy. State sovereignty is outlined in Article 51 of the United Nations Charter.

Background

Arab Spring

The Arab Spring was a series of antigovernment and pro-democracy protests that spread across the Middle East in 2011. The protest movement was to express the people’s resentment towards Arab dictatorships, political corruption, and unemployment. The Arab Spring successfully unseated leaders in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. As a result of the civil unrest spreading across the Middle East during the Arab Spring, foreign nations intervened primarily neighboring nations and the United States of America (USA).

Yemen Conflict

In the 19th century, European countries invaded the Middle East to establish a presence. Aden, located in Southern Yemen, was conquered by Britain in 1839, while the Ottoman Empire occupied Northern Yemen. As Britain continued to expand north and east of Aden, the Ottoman Empire expanded inland. In 1904, a joint commission formed a treaty which formally demarcated the border between the British in South Yemen and the Ottoman Empire in North Yemen.

At the end of World War I in 1918, the north became independent after the departure of Ottoman forces. The Imam of the Zaydīs became the leader in the north, because of his campaign against the Ottoman Empire in Yemen. In the 1920s, the Zaydīs’ Imam began extending his authority into the south, and gradually consolidated his position as leader of the Yemenis. However, the south of Yemen remained a British protectorate, independent of the Imamate in the north. In 1967, the British transferred sovereignty to the National Liberation Front (NLF) in South Yemen,

creating a sovereign state of South Yemen. But without resources and aid from Western or Arab States, the newly established Southern Yemenese government began to turn towards the Soviet Union. The country was provided with economic and technical assistance from the Soviet Union. By the early 1970s, the government renamed itself the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen and became an openly Marxist state.

Despite gaining complete autonomy, in North Yemen, the Imam royalists and republicans were engaged in a full-blown civil war. Both sides had foreign support—Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Jordan supported the royalists, Egypt and the Soviet Union and other Eastern-bloc states supported the republicans. In 1970, the foreign supporters—Saudi Arabia and Egypt—agreed upon the Compromise of 1970. Eventually, the republicans were victorious, and the agreement established a republican government, in which some major positions were given to the Shia Imam royalist faction. However, it was agreed that the Imam and his family would not be allowed to return to Yemen or take part in the new government whatsoever.

The newly composed government made little progress in political and economic development. Instead, foreign involvement in Yemen caused the conflict between the Houthis and Yemeni government to magnify. In 2014, the government attempted to arrest Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi, a Zaidi religious leader of the Houthis and former parliamentarian, leading to the tensions between Houthis and Yemeni government becoming a full-fledged civil war.

Saudi Arabia in Yemen

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia neighbors Yemen geographically, and its dominant religion is Sunni Islam. Saudi Arabia has had deep ties with Yemen since the early 1900s. Saudi Arabia's intervention in several of Yemen's conflict has proved influential, as evidenced by the outcomes of the North Yemen Civil War (1962) and the South Yemen Civil War (1971). The reason for Saudi Arabia's participation relates to its long feud with Iran. Iran had started to support the Houthis a Shia Islam group. Saudi Arabia, a Sunni dominant country, wanted to prevent Yemen from becoming a Shia dominant country. Bordering both Yemen and Iraq (a Shia dominant country), the Saudis are threatened with the possibility of being bordered by two non-Sunni countries. Therefore, Saudi Arabia has provided support for the Yemeni government against Shia Houthi rebels. Saudi Arabia has conducted numerous airstrikes on Houthi bases with help from the United States. Moreover, coalitions led by Saudi Arabia and Sunni Arabs have been sent to restore the government of Hadi in Aden, and retake the capital Sanaa from the Houthis.

Iran in Yemen

Iran is a supporter of the Houthi rebel group in Yemen, as both are predominantly Shia. Iran has the largest Shia majority in the world, with more than 66 million people making up nearly 90% of the population. Iranian intervention was motivated by the idea that the Houthis could be used as a platform to defeat Saudi Arabia, as the Yemeni government was supported by the Saudis. Allegedly, Iran has supported the Houthi rebel group with weapons, financial aid, and military adviser. However, Iranian officials deny claims that they are giving financial and military support to the Houthis.

Syrian War

The conflict in Syria began with peaceful uprisings against President Bashar al-Assad. The “Arab Spring” in neighboring countries contributed to the eruption of uprisings in Syria during 2011. The government responded to the protests with military force, turning the peaceful protests into a full-scale civil war. As the war continued, the existing tensions between Shia Muslims and Sunni Muslims escalated.

Currently, the main forces in the nation are the Syrian government, the Syrian National Army, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and international forces. International involvement in the war started in 2015, with Russia supporting President Assad and the Syrian government. Following Russia’s involvement in the war, Iran, Israel, Qatar, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the United States intervened with troops and support for different groups. The humanitarian crisis in Syria has resulted in a displacement of 7.6 million Syrians and a civilian death toll of 200,000. ;

The use of chemical and biological weapons (CBW) in Syria have incited President Donald Trump and the US government to consider launching more airstrikes in Syria to combat the “affront to humanity.” In 2017, the United States under President Trump had already launched 59 missiles on a Syrian Government controlled air base, Shayrat. The reasoning behind the airstrike was for the “national security interest of the United States to prevent and deter the spread and use of deadly chemical weapons”, as Trump stated. Once again, in 2018, the US, with support from Britain and France, launched a missile strike on Syria due to suspicion of chemical weapons. Both airstrikes were conducted without UN SC authorization because of Russia’s threat of vetoing. However, the past and potential airstrikes cannot be considered fully as unilateral humanitarian intervention as the United States has refused asylum to hundreds of Syrian refugees. Similarly, other countries involved in the war are not acting solely for humanitarian reasons, but also for national interests.

Major Parties Involved

United States of America (USA)

The United States stands at the center of foreign interventions in the Middle East. Many of its interventions remain controversial not only because they violate state sovereignty, but also because of the complexity of their outcomes. The success of these interventions are often only measured by one side of the conflict, commonly the side receiving foreign support; hence, determining the success of an intervention often favors the intervening state. Therefore, no outcomes of interventions can be considered entirely “successful”, even if they have seemingly positive results.

The 9/11 attacks in the United States by the al-Qaeda terrorist group ignited the “War on Terror” against terrorist groups in Middle Eastern nations. In 2003, the “War on Terror” began with an invasion of US troops in Iraq authorized by President George W. Bush. The US Invasion of Iraq was conducted outside of the UN because of the Security Council’s failure to achieve an agreement over the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. The US government justified their intervention with speculation that Saddam Hussein, the President of Iraq at the time, possessed or was

in the process of obtaining weapons of mass destruction (WMD). However, after invading Iraq, the United States did not find any evidence of WMDs; therefore, the entire intervention was based on unjustified reasons.

In 2011, after facing casualties, the United States officially withdrew from Iraq. After Hussein's capture by the US, the nation was left in shambles with an unstable government and a deteriorating economy. The instability of the government led to a rise in sectarian conflict between Shias and Sunnis. Violent insurgent groups began to grow within the nation, not only committing atrocious war crimes on civilians, but also causing millions to be displaced. Despite the end of Hussein's dictatorial rule in Iraq, the United States contributed to causing even more violations of human rights in Iraq that continue today.

Moreover, after the 9/11 attacks, the United States of America established a site for intelligence gathering and drone attacks in Yemen. In 2017, after the Trump administration removed certain criteria for the White House review of operations, the USA has conducted over 45 airstrikes on Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. The United States has also supported the Yemeni government against the Houthi rebels by supplying them with military equipment and spare military mechanical parts.

Yemen

Yemen is a nation in the Middle East, bordering Oman and Saudi Arabia, along the Gulf of Aden. Its population is divided between numerous tribal and religious groups, with 65% of the country practicing Sunni Islam, and 35% of the country practicing Shia Islam. The root of the conflict in Yemen arises from the differences between Shia and Sunni Muslims both in Yemen, and in a broader regional sense. The development of the conflict can be categorized into the unification of Yemen, the Yemenese uprising, and the ongoing civil war in Yemen.

However, the conflict in Yemen is not only a purely internal affair and can be viewed as a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Iran (Shia) and Saudi Arabia (Sunni) believe in opposing branches of Islam, and have been waging a proxy war throughout the Middle East. This war is characterized by each of the two rivals supporting their own religion in civil wars throughout the region. This conflict affects Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. In Yemen, the foreign intervention is from the Iranian government, aiding the Houthis, a Shia Islam movement, and Saudi Arabia supporting the opposing government forces, comprised primarily of Sunni Muslims.

According to the United Nations, the civil war has resulted in at least 10,000 dead, including almost 4,000 civilians, and has displaced 3.2 million Yemenis, out of a population of 27 million. Furthermore, the war in Yemen has destroyed the economy of what was already the poorest Arab country in the region and ignited a deadly famine that has caused mass starvation, marking the crisis as one of the worst humanitarian crisis in history.

Russian Federation

In general, Russia's involvement in foreign interventions has primarily been due to geopolitical concerns. Many of Russia's interventions have led other nations to respond, especially the United States. However, Russia's use of vetoes in the UN Security Council— notably regarding Kosovo, Libya, and Syria— have raised concerns with state sovereignty in interventions. As a result of Russia's vetoes/threats to veto, other nations and organizations have been compelled to send military forces outside of UN authorization.

Russia's involvement in the Middle East began before military intervention, in which Russia supplied weapons and equipment to the Syrian government. But in 2015, Russia's military involvement in Syria began after the Syrian government requested help from them. The intervention consisted of airstrikes on opposition groups, including ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and Levant). Many member states have raised opposition against Russia's intervention in Syria, highlighting that in reality, Russian airstrikes have caused the deaths of thousands of civilians. Currently, Russian troops remain in Syria while continuing airstrikes.

Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

In 1945, the United Nations was established with the UN Charter. The UN was created with intentions to maintain global peace and security. Under the UN Charter, UN member states are responsible for protecting human welfare and promoting international stability, but with the limits of having to respect other states' sovereignty; as a result, the foreign interventions in the Middle East have become a question of international legality.

In order to combat the harmful consequences of foreign interventions, especially in the Middle East, efforts have been made to limit the extent of foreign interventions in general. The Responsibility to Protect (or R2P) was affirmed by member states of the United Nations at the 2005 World Summit. Due to the international community's failure to respond to genocides in Rwanda and the Balkans, the concept of the Responsibility to Protect was created. The R2P seeks to address genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect). The establishment of R2P marks the only progress towards limiting the use of "humanitarian" military interventions.

However, R2P differs from the idea of foreign intervention. R2P focuses on the duty of a nation to protect its own people, whereas foreign intervention refers to the use of military force and focuses more on the right to intervene. Despite the differences, the third pillar of R2P brings controversy because of its vagueness in defining "appropriate collective action", in which military intervention could be justified. As a result, the R2P has not proved to be completely successful in establishing a legal method for foreign interventions.

The limitation of the R2P lies in its dependence on the UN Security Council (SC) authorization. The SC on occasion can be ineffective in decision-making due to the veto power of P5 nations. Ultimately, however, R2P has proved to be the only international attempt at resolving the international legality of foreign interventions.

Possible Solutions

- The primary issue of foreign intervention in the Middle East is that the term “foreign intervention” is expendable, and nations use different reasons to justify their interventions. At this point, without a solid definition of the term, any military intervention can be justified as one promoting human rights. While humanitarian intervention driven by national interests have occasionally been successful in the past, they have also led to disastrous consequences, not to mention that it infringes upon national sovereignty. Delegates need to consider a new definition that addresses state consent, sovereignty, and extent of military force. Delegates should consider the nations choosing to intervene and if the nation’s intentions are solely based on humanitarian reasons.
- The selectiveness of foreign interventions in the Middle East presents another issue for delegates to examine, as national interests primarily motivate interventions. The issue is that nations are often unclear with their intentions and purpose on intervening with military force. In the past, the international community has witnessed nations selectively picking when to become involved in conflicts in the Middle East that benefit national interest, and lack of interventions in cases where national interests were not at stake.
- Another issue to address is how foreign interventions are conducted in the Middle East. Currently, the interventions are mainly militaristic and result in devastating consequences for civilians. Delegates may consider solutions that limit military force in interventions or consider alternatives to military action. The outcomes from the use of military forces are often costly and bloody.
- A driving factor behind foreign interventions in the Middle East is the conflicts arising in the Middle East. A possible solution could be to recognize the catalysts of the conflicts in the Middle East and finding a way to mitigate tensions, such as greater foreign direct investment.
- The extent to which nations can intervene in the Middle East poses a challenging and controversial topic. Delegates must consider both the perspectives of intervening nations and Middle Eastern nations in the conflict, as well as the unreliability of interventions witnessed in history. Foreign interventions in the past have had a number of successes and failures.

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