Rethinking Foreign Military Interventions to Promote Human Rights: Evidence from Libya, Bahrain and Syria

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Foreign military intervention to promote democracy and human rights in the target states is a hotly debated issue. There are two camps of scholars who hold diametrically opposed views on the linkages between military interventions, democracy and human rights promotions. Scholars in the pro-intervention camp (see, for example, Brooks, 2012; Peceny, 1999; Perriello, 2012) vigorously argue that military interventions are necessary to unseat autocratic regimes, save the lives of people who aspire for democracy and promote human rights of the oppressed peoples. Interventions, according to them, are the best and most effective ways to democratize the authoritarian states and societies. The autocratic rulers would not otherwise budge and make way for democratic governance to ensure human rights. Murdie and Davis (2010) have examined this issue from a humanitarian peacekeeping operations viewpoint and arrived at similar conclusions. They argue that humanitarian peacekeeping interventions in states wracked by civil wars, though problematic, hold the potential to contribute to improvements in human rights conditions, and attempts to mediate between belligerent groups by humanitarian interveners might result in producing more respect for human rights.

The anti-intervention camp (Bellin, 2004–05; de Mesquita and Downs, 2006; Gleditsch et al., 2007; Meernik et al., 2006), in contrast, rules out any positive connections between interventions and human rights and democracy promotions on the ground that third-party interventions are harmful to domestic reconciliation process and peace building in the target states. Military interventions, they hold, rarely contribute to the trajectory of

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democratic development in states with complex social fabrics and political templates. A recent quantitative study by Peksen (2012) on the nexus between military interventions and human rights has found that armed interventions contribute to the use of coercive powers by the target states against their own citizens and end up producing negative impacts on human rights conditions.

The debates between the pro and anti-intervention camps has flared up lately after the 2011 NATO-led military intervention to dislodge the Gaddafi government in Libya. The pro-democracy movements in Libya, sparked by the Arab Spring in early 2011, became violent once Gaddafi opted for the use of force against the protestors and threatened to eliminate them. The international response to the situation culminated in the approval of Resolution 1973 by the UN Security Council on March 17, 2011, that authorized the use of force against the Gaddafi government based on the "responsibility to protect" (R2P) doctrine, developed by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) in 2001.[1] Proponents justified NATO's armed actions against Gaddafi and his supporters on urgent humanitarian grounds to protect civilians and to prevent further grave atrocities Gaddafi committed or threatened to commit against his own people (Evans, 2012, 2011; *Guardian*, 2011; Thakur, 2011; Weiss, 2011). R2P intervention, they hold, saved the lives of thousands of Libyan civilians. Critics, on the contrary, brought to the fore the issues of great powers' geopolitical interests in designing and executing the intervention and regime change that overstepped the mandate of Resolution 1973 (Hehir, 2013; Kuperman, 2011; Nuruzzaman, 2013a). The issues of geopolitical interests and regime change subsequently overshadowed the Security Council and stopped it from taking R2P actions on Syria which many scholars and commentators see as a major blow to the R2P doctrine itself (Axworthy and Rock, 2012; *The National*, 2012; Stewart, 2012; Strauss, 2012).

This paper maps out the Arab Spring-inspired foreign direct and indirect military interventions in the three Arab states of Libya, Bahrain and Syria, explores the dynamics leading to interventions and examines the impacts of the interventions on their human rights conditions. However, it should be mentioned at the outset that interventions in the three Arab states sharply differ from one another in terms of nature, scale and dimensions. NATO's armed intervention in Libya was authorized by the UN Security Council and hence had international legitimacy. R2P was the normative standard used to justify intervention in Libya, though this new doctrine does not support foreign military interventions to promote democracy and human rights; it is limited to protection of civilians from the four grave crimes of genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing, as clearly defined by the 2005 *World Summit Outcome Document*.[2] The protection of civilians is, however, related to promoting respects for human

Abstract. Scholarly opinions on the linkages between foreign military interventions and human rights promotions or violations are highly divided across the board. While many scholars see military interventions as effective means to save and promote human lives and rights from the clutches of repressive regimes, others reject such interventions as harmful to domestic reconciliations and rights promotions. The Arab Spring has renewed the debates between the liberal enthusiasts who staunchly supported NATO's military intervention to free up the Libyans from the Gaddafi regime and the critics who saw creeping dangers in this new intervention, ostensibly inspired by the "responsibility to protect" doctrine. This paper investigates the issue of Arab Spring-led foreign direct and indirect military interventions in Libya, Bahrain and Syria and critically examines the consequences of interventions for improvements or decline in Arab human rights conditions. Its findings support the position of the anti-intervention scholars that foreign military interventions produce deleterious effects on human rights in the target states.

Résumé. La relation entre l'intervention militaire et la promotion ou la violation des droits de l'homme est un sujet hautement polémique. Tandis que plusieurs chercheurs considèrent l'intervention militaire comme un moyen efficace pour sauvegarder les vies mises en péril par des régimes répressifs et instaurer les droits de l'homme, d'autres réfutent qu'une telle intervention ne fait qu'aggraver la situation humanitaire et retarder la réconciliation nationale. En fait, le printemps arabe a relancé le débat entre les supporteurs de l'intervention militaire de l'OTAN pour libérer les Libyens du régime de Kadhafi et les sceptiques qui voyaient les dangers d'une telle démarche, surtout que "la responsabilité de protéger", qui fut à la base de cette décision, ne stipule pas l'intervention militaire de l'OTAN pour instaurer la démocratie et protéger les droits de l'homme, mais pour protéger les civiles des atrocités commises par leurs gouvernements. Cet article étudie les interventions militaires directes et indirectes en Libye, à Bahreïn comme en Syrie, à la suite du printemps arabe. Il examine de façon critique les répercussions de ces interventions sur les droits de l'homme dans ces pays, pour conclure que cette politique interventionniste eut des conséquences néfastes et joua un rôle dans la détérioration des droits de l'homme dans les états ciblés.

rights, which the R2P seeks to achieve through post-intervention rebuilding processes.

Saudi Arabia's March 2011 intervention in Bahrain, backed by the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council), was a counter-revolutionary step to defeat the pro-democracy forces, suppress human rights and preserve the hereditary monarchical rules in the Gulf Arab region. Until Russia's direct military actions to defend the Bashar Al-Assad government, starting on September 30, 2015, Syria was experiencing indirect external interventions, both by regional states and extra-regional great powers. Dubbed indirect or proxy wars or interventions (see, Hadaya, 2013; Hughes, 2014), external involvements in the internal affairs of a third country (often civil wars ignited by repressive governments) are driven by divergent geopolitical and economic interests. The foreign powers do not directly get entangled in the civil wars in third countries; rather, they supply funds, arms and ammunitions to their respective preferred groups to fight their opponents (Innes, 2012). The different Syrian groups, Iran and the Russia-backed

Bashar Al-Assad government as well as the rebel groups (such as the US-supported Free Syrian Army, Saudi-supported Islamic Front or the self-declared Islamic State), are fighting each other either to cling to power or capture power in Damascus.

The common feature that connects the three types of interventions in Bahrain, Libya and Syria is that each one of them has greatly harmed the causes of democratic governance and the promotion of human rights. Consequently, a decline in human rights conditions, as analyzed below, has been the end result in all three types of interventions. This paper further argues that in all three cases, human rights have been, in fact, largely trumped by geopolitical and strategic interests of the regional actors and extra-regional great powers in Bahrain, Libya and Syria. The findings of the paper vindicate the position of the anti-intervention camp that foreign military interventions produce negative impacts on human rights and democracy promotions in the target states.

Arab Spring, Human Rights and Interventions

The Arab Spring has been a series of momentous political upheavals in the Arab world that quickly spread from Tunisia in North Africa to Yemen in the Arabian Peninsula between December 2010 and March 2011. These popular uprisings for political change belied the previous predictions that the Arab world would remain in the thrall of despotism (Kedourie, 1992) or miss the democratic waves unleashed by the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall (Fukuyama, 1992; Huntington, 1998). The drive for changes in the Arab political landscape created so much enthusiasm that some Arab scholars even characterized it as "the Arab equivalent of 1989 in Central and Eastern Europe." As Amin Maalouf has written:

> At no point in history—not even the fall of the Berlin Wall—have we seen tens of millions of people brave death, baring their chests to bullets, and growing neither tired nor discouraged, as we have seen in Taez, Zawiya, Manama and Homs, day after day, week after week. It is an exceptional, unprecedented phenomenon and perhaps the harbinger of a democratic renewal world-wide. (Maalouf, 2011: xix)

Contrary to Maalouf's hope for a "democratic renewal world-wide" spearheaded by the Arab Spring, some Arab scholars hold that the pro-democracy movements were hardly driven by the impulse to democratize the Arab states. Rabah (2012), for example, argues that democracy was not the goal of the Arab Spring; its primary objective was to abolish corrupt and authoritarian Arab regimes. The Arab youths were looking for an end to hereditary or long family-centric rules to establish accountability

and transparency and thus break the traditional monopoly of political power. But viewed realistically, these objectives are achievable through the introduction of democracy, a system of governance that basically aims at promoting citizens' human rights and security. Given the repressive nature of the different Arab regimes, it would be hard to deny that human rights and the three basic elements of human security—freedom from want (employment creation, reduction in poverty and inequalities), freedom from fear (promotion of peace, elimination of conflicts, crimes and violence) and freedom to live with dignity (respects for human rights, an end to intimidation and discrimination, illegal arrests, detention and torture)—critically conditioned and drove the course of the Arab Spring (Nuruzzaman, 2013b). The impulse to promote and strengthen human rights and security for the Arab people was no doubt a big push behind the Arab Spring.

A caveat is in order here: human rights, as a concept, is too comprehensive to defy any simple definition; it includes political freedom and cultural, social and economic rights affirmed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966 and the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. This paper employs the concept of human rights in a minimalist sense. Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides a minimalist definition of human rights: "Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person." The 2005 *World Summit Outcome Document*, built on *The Responsibility to Protect* report by the ICISS, further narrows the concept of human rights by focusing on "protection responsibilities": the protection of people from the four crimes of genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes and crimes against humanity. This paper, for analytical purposes, applies Article 3 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights to investigate human rights conditions of Libyans, Bahrainis and Syrians where foreign direct and indirect military interventions have taken place or are still continuing.

NATO's Intervention in Libya

NATO's 2011 intervention in Libya set an entirely new example where intervention was undertaken based on the R2P doctrine that seeks to halt mass killings of people by their own governments and thus ensure the safety of civilian population who are or may be in harm's way. The UN General Assembly discussed and debated the R2P doctrine in 2005 and finally issued the *World Summit Outcome Document* the same year calling on all states to bear the responsibility to protect their citizens. The Security Council declared its support for the *World Summit Outcome Document* in its Resolution 1674 of 2006 and passed another resolution (Resolution

1894 of 2009) to finally support the R2P, but with reservations from China and Russia all along. The council discussed the R2P issue first in 2002. The Chinese opposed any idea of the use of force for humanitarian purposes outside the Security Council framework. The Russians saw it as facilitating probable unilateral interventions by the West that would risk undermining the UN Charter (Primakov, 2004; Welsh, 2004). The non-aligned countries suspected it as "simply a more sophisticated way of conceptualizing and hence legitimizing humanitarian intervention" (Bellamy, 2008: 616). The US initially showed lukewarm interest in R2P-related actions. John Bolton, the US ambassador to the UN in the former George W. Bush administration, wrote a series of letters to the delegates to the 2005 UN World Summit that the Security Council members had no legal obligation to undertake R2P interventions to halt mass atrocities and insisted on retaining US freedom to selectively intervene in foreign countries on humanitarian grounds (*Washington Post*, 2005).

Still, the Security Council's belated support for the R2P doctrine was remarkable in view of its indifference to and avoidance of responsibility to stop several genocides, ethnic cleansings and massive killings committed in the past, and its commitment to better deal with "repeat occurrences of similar tragedies" in the future (Thakur, 2015: 12). The 1994 Rwandan genocide saw an orgy of mass killings of roughly 800,000 civilians; the Russian troops committed genocidal crimes in Chechnya eliminating nearly 300,000 Chechens between 1994 and 1996 and 1999 and 2009; and the Serbian aggression against the Bosnians during 1992–1995 resulted in the commission of war crimes and crimes against humanity. The council did not move to deal with these grave incidences. The moment of action for the council arrived after the Arab Spring had sparked mass protests and violence in Libya in February 2011.

Anti-Gaddafi protests in Libya first started in the eastern city of Benghazi and then spread to other cities across the country. The protests soon turned violent with Gaddafi's threats of use of force to finish off the protestors. His long iron rule (1969–2011), repressive policies and intolerance for human rights of the Libyans were largely responsible for the quick outbreak of protest movements and violence. Under the rubric of "enemies of the revolution," his government regularly rounded up all sorts of political opponents, carried out extrajudicial executions and criminalized negative comments against state officials (Reuters, 2011). The oppressed Libyans, encouraged by the popular revolts in neighbouring Tunisia that successfully toppled dictator Zine el Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011, burst into protests. The gravity of the situation quickly led the Security Council to step up actions by approving Resolution 1970 on February 26, 2011. It imposed an arms embargo on the Gaddafi government and warned it not to use force against the unarmed civilian protestors. Three weeks later, the council passed another resolution (Resolution 1973) on March 17,

2011, that created the legal context for military intervention in Libya. It called for the creation of a "no-fly zone" over Libya, and approved "all necessary measures" to stop Gaddafi's atrocities against his own people. China and Russia, permanent members on the council, and three other non-permanent members at the time—Brazil, India and Germany—expressed reservations and abstained from voting. Among the Arab states, Qatar directly participated in the NATO-led intervention that started on March 19, 2011, by contributing fighter jets to enforce the "no-fly zone" and sent special military forces to train the rebel fighters (Roberts, 2011).

NATO's military intervention soon gave rise to a series of new concerns and accusations. Critics charge that NATO violated Resolution 1973 in at least two respects. First, instead of protecting civilian population by enforcing the no-fly zone, NATO started to wage a full-scale war against the Gaddafi forces for regime change in Libya. It was the final goal of the NATO-led coalition to remove Gaddafi from power (Paris, 2014: 583). Secondly, NATO sided with the anti-Gaddafi rebel forces by providing them with air coverage and supplying them with arms and ammunitions, primarily by France (Keaten, 2011) —acts that overstepped the mandate of Resolution 1973. The emerging consensus on R2P was thus greatly undermined. Gareth Evans and Ramesh Thakur, the two staunchest proponents of R2P, even admit that "the R2P consensus underpinning Resolution 1973 fell apart over the course of 2011, damaged by gaps in expectation, communication, and accountability between those who mandated the operation and those who executed it" (2013: 206). Moreover, the intervention in Libya looked more bizarre when similar grave humanitarian situations in Bahrain, Syria or Yemen did not warrant actions by the Security Council. The former Ali Abdullah Saleh government in Yemen, for example, killed nearly 2,000 Yemenis by the end of March 2012 (Aral, 2014) but the Security Council remained indifferent and unmoved. It took a year for the council to pass Resolution 2014 on October 21, 2011, that called for a Yemenis-led political reconciliation process but no R2P actions.

Quick action against the Gaddafi government was apparently conditioned by a combination of political and strategic factors. Gaddafi, despite his overtures to the West in the wake of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, had already run into difficult relationships with the West. He was a leading voice against Western and Israeli hegemonic ambitions in the Arab world, he nationalized West-owned oil companies in the 1970s and was accused of executing the 1988 Lockerbie bombing that resulted in numerous American deaths. He also allegedly used billions of petro-dollars to support anti-government forces in Chad, Mali and the Congo (Adams, 2012: 8), which the West resented. On top of that, Libya's oil resources largely drove the Western powers to support the rebel forces. It is reported that Britain, France and the US had struck oil bargains with the anti-Gaddafi rebel

organization—such as the National Transition Council (NTC) —before they embarked on a military course against Gaddafi forces (*King's Student Law Review*, 2012). Extra economic benefits, it can be argued, were expected from Western access to Libyan markets, investments in the oil industry and arms sales to the post-Gaddafi governments.

Saudi Intervention in Bahrain

Pro-democracy protests started in Bahrain around the same time as in Libya. The primary causes of the protest movements largely originated from Bahrain's internal socio-economic dynamics. There are widespread domestic discontents about power and wealth sharing between the Bahraini majority Shi'ites and the minority Sunnis. The ruling Sunni Al-Khalifa family, which draws its ancestral roots from Najd, in central Saudi Arabia, runs Bahrain with the support of a small coalition of elites consisting of tribal leaders and big business families from both Sunni and Shi'ite sects, but most of the wealth and resources are controlled by the Sunnis (Kinninmont, 2012: v). The Shi'ites accuse the Sunni-controlled Bahraini government of systematically discriminating against them and regularly complain that they have restricted access to high ranking public posts (less than 20%) and no representation in the Bahraini armed forces. The government pursues, the Shi'ites charge, a policy of naturalization of Sunnis from other Arab countries to dilute the Shi'ite majority in the country (International Crisis Group, 2011: 4–5; US Department of State, 2011).

Once the pro-democracy movements broke out, the Sunni Al-Khalifa family and Saudi Arabia quickly branded it as an Iran-engineered Shi'ite plot to take over Bahrain. The late Saudi king Abdullah, in order to pre-empt Shi'ite political and economic dominance, sent troops to Bahrain on March 14, 2011, under the umbrella of the GCC which Iran branded as Saudi "invasion of Bahrain."[3] The king justified intervention in the name of restoring order in Bahrain, though his real intention was to defeat the political rise of the Shi'ites in Bahrain and elsewhere in the Gulf neighbourhood. The Saudi anti-Shi'ite position was tersely expressed by an Arab official following the deployment in Bahrain: "King Abdullah has been clear that Saudi Arabia will never allow Shia rule in Bahrain—never" (*New York Times*, 2011).

A series of strategic and economic factors decisively shaped Saudi response to the pro-democracy movements in Bahrain. Iran-Saudi competitions for dominance in the Gulf neighbourhood had their obvious impact on the developments in Bahrain. Though the Bahraini Shi'ites hardly see Iran as a model of political-religious system of government, the Saudis were nervous that after overthrowing the Sunni Al-Khalifa family, they

would move closer to Iran. A Shi'ites-dominated government in Manama could create two serious implications for Saudi Arabia and also for the US (Nuruzzaman, 2013c: 369-73). There was the possibility of closer Iran-Bahrain relations, a risky development that could precipitate a decline in Bahrain's relations with Riyadh and Washington. Saudi Arabia was already mindful of closer ties between Shi'ite Iran and post-Saddam Shi'ites-dominated Iraq. More ominously, Shi'ite dominance in Bahrain could set a precedent for Saudi Shi'ites, who are concentrated in the kingdom's eastern province, which is just sixteen miles off Bahrain's west coast, to follow suit. In addition to that, Bahrain has been a hugely important economic centre for Saudi Arabia. Saudi investors inject billions of dollars in Bahrain's tourism, development projects and construction. Until the pro-democracy movements broke out, Riyadh also made use of Bahrain's excellent financial services to channel oil money for investments abroad (Ameinfo.com, 2011). Likewise, for the US, Bahrain holds enormous strategic significance. Manama currently hosts the US Fifth Fleet and houses a major military base. The US keeps the oil flowing through the Strait of Hormuz, which Iran threatens to shut down occasionally, depending on its military relationships with Bahrain and Qatar that hosts the US Central Command. That explains why the US did not deter Saudi intervention but rather acquiesced to it (Rozoff, 2011).

Iran, in contrast, has had historically strained relationships with Bahrain. The Iranian claim of sovereignty over Bahrain, occasionally made by Iranian newspapers and political leaders,[4] has pushed the two countries farther apart and contributed to low level of economic co-operation and trade relations, leaving the demographic factor of Shi'ite majority in Bahrain to dominate their bilateral relations. The Shi'ites-led pro-democracy movement in Bahrain is mostly a response to the government's discriminatory policies—a locally oriented agenda but Iran was implicated because of its Shi'ite identity. Both Bahrain and Saudi Arabia create and exploit Iran-phobia to cover up their anti-Shi'ite policies (Meyer, 2011).

Multi-party Interventions in Syria

The Arab Spring reached Syria in March 2011. The anti-government protestors, deeply displeased with the long anti-people rule of the Al-Assad family, initially carried out peaceful protests which gradually culminated in a bloody civil war. President Bashar Al-Assad succeeded his father, the late President Hafez Al-Assad, in July 2000, with the promise of "transparency," "democracy" and "the desperate need for constructive criticism" but in the course of the next ten years few of his promises were translated into reality (Human Rights Watch, 2010: 1–2). The state of emergency, enacted in 1963, was not abolished; the old practices of detaining people

without arrest warrants by the security agencies continued unabated; and special courts established under emergency laws continued their unfair trials. The desperate Syrians finally lost patience with living under the Al-Assad rule.

But, unlike the Libyan and Bahraini situations, the Syrian conflict is dominated by a multiplicity of actors and interests. Syria is a country of diverse religious groups and sects, multiple ethnic conglomerates and hostile political groups. These factors, once the anti-government protests took off, tore apart the social and religious fabric of Syria (Guzansky and Berti, 2013), producing cross-border spillover effects and drawing in external parties with vested interests in this Arab state. At the regional level, Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey soon moved in to protect their respective allies and interests while extra-regional great powers—Russia, China and the US—got entangled to promote or protect their strategic and business interests.

For Iran, Syria holds enormous strategic values. Damascus is Tehran's only Arab partner in the Middle East and their alliance relationship has been in the making since 1979, which solidified in the last three decades in response to a series of events, the most important being the 2003 US invasion of Iraq that posed a serious threat to the survival of the religious authorities in Tehran. From ideological, political and cultural viewpoints, Tehran and Damascus are simply odd political bedfellows (for example, Persian versus Arab, religious versus secular, Shi'ite versus Sunni majority, and so forth) but they share a number of common strategic goals, including joint resistance to the common enemies, US and Israel, promotion of security and survival through mutual support, regaining the strategic Golan Heights from Israel (for Syria), maintaining their converging interests in Lebanon through Hezbollah, and putting a check on the rise of a third country to become the pre-eminent regional power in the Middle East, such as Saddam Hussein's Iraq was between 1988 and 2003 (Goodarzi, 2014: 2). The outbreak of armed conflict and the probable collapse of the Bashar Al-Assad government had the potential to end the Iran-Syria alliance and seriously curtail Iran's strategic maneuverability in the Middle East by cutting off its link to Hezbollah in Lebanon (Hokayem, 2012: 8). Tehran, already under stringent US and EU sanctions, could hardly afford to lose Syria. To avoid such a specter of strategic paralysis and possible capitulation to the West, Iran responded to the Syrian conflict by sending military advisors, arms and economic aid for the Al-Assad government (CNN, 2012).

Saudi Arabia's policy of standing by the anti-Assad Sunni rebels was more driven by its perceived strategic interests in curtailing Iran's regional dominance and containing the rise of the Shi'ites after the Shi'ites-dominated Iraq had moved closer to Tehran following the withdrawal of US forces in 2011(Gause, 2014: 12–15). Riyadh had already taken an anti-Iran and anti-Shi'ite position by sending troops to Bahrain to crush the Shi'ites-led

pro-democracy movements. In Syria, the Saudis have sought the goal of replacing the Al-Assad government, dominated by the Alawite sect of Shi'ite Islam, with a majority Sunni-dominated government to further isolate Iran in the Middle East, compensate for the loss in Iraq and curtail Iran's link to the Levant (Hokayem, 2012: 12). Saudi Arabia's tiny ally Qatar has similarly championed the cause of the Syrian Sunnis. Emboldened by its role in NATO's intervention to oust Gaddafi in October 2011, Qatar has tried political, diplomatic and financial tools through the Arab League to bring down the Al-Assad government, though it did not succeed (Cafiero, 2012; Chulov, 2012). For Turkey, the conflict in Syria posed a big dilemma: whether or not to support the Syrian pro-democracy forces when the Kurdish separatist forces were waging a war against Ankara. The Turkish government finally decided to side with the anti-Assad forces, extended military and non-military support to the various rebel groups and followed the Arab League and the West to impose economic and air traffic sanctions on Damascus to force the Al-Assad government to step down from power.

US, Russian and Chinese involvements in the Syrian conflict reflect their open and secret rivalries in the Middle East and around the world. Washington's primary objective behind supporting the so-called moderate Syrian rebel forces was to weaken Iran by weaning Syria away and thus break the so-called "axis of resistance" (Iran-Syria-Hezbollah alliance). Yet such interests did not warrant direct American intervention in Syria. In fact, US interests to intervene in Syria dissipated because of a fear of drawing in Syria's allies Iran and Russia and that the Syrian civil war did not directly threaten US interests (*The New York Times*, 2012). This is a clear departure from its military role in Libya under the R2P doctrine. The recent rise of the Islamic State, proclaimed on June 29, 2014, straddling vast territories across eastern Syria and northwestern Iraq, has resulted in more active US involvements in Iraq and Syria but Washington is unlikely to actively seek the fall of the Al-Assad government in such a volatile situation. There are big uncertainties about which Syrian group would capture power in Damascus after Al-Assad's fall.

Russian and Chinese involvements, in contrast, were partly driven by their strategic interests in Syria and partly conditioned by the developments spurred by NATO's intervention in Libya. Syria has been a longtime Russian ally that provides Moscow a direct foothold in the Middle East, buys Russian military hardware and equipment every year worth billions of dollars, extends a naval facility to the Russian navy in the eastern Mediterranean Sea and, in turn, enjoys Russian diplomatic and military support to stave off Western and Israeli pressures. Additionally, Russia is scared of the Islamist forces in Syria whose probable victory might encourage the Sunni rebel groups in the North Caucasus region to destabilize Russia as a whole (Charap, 2013: 35–36). Moscow's post-Soviet

diplomatic activism under President Vladimir Putin clearly views Syria as a "non-negotiable" case with the US. A change of regime in Syria would also put seriously into question Russia's credibility in the international diplomatic arena. China's interests in Syria, on the other hand, are mostly commercial, reflective of its growing business and investment relations with Damascus. China's exports to Syria totaled more than $2.4 billion in 2011 alone. Beijing has also concluded multibillion-dollar oil deals with Damascus to explore and develop Syrian oil fields (Wuthnow, 2012). The strategic dimension of this relationship also originates from the need to curtail the hitherto uncontested US dominance in the Middle East. Moscow's and Beijing's interests nicely dovetail with Iran's policy of defending the Al-Assad government and that has put the three countries on the same strategic page on the Syrian question.

The divergent interests of the US, Russia and China in Syria had their full play at the UN Security Council. Alarmed by the misuse of Security Council Resolution 1973 to effect regime change in Libya, Russia and China struck down two Security Council resolutions on Syria in October 2011 and in February 2012 respectively. Neither resolution contained any provision for the use of force or the threats of sanctions against the Al-Assad government. Recently, China and Russia have also jointly vetoed another West-sponsored Security Council resolution to refer Syria to the International Criminal Court (*The Guardian*, 2014). The specific factors that have critically shaped Chinese and Russian stances on Syria in the Security Council include their belief that they were deceived by the West over intervention in Libya, their staunch support for the principle of state sovereignty and non-intervention as contained in the UN Charter, opposition to the rise of Islamist forces in the Caucasus, Central Asia and Muslim-dominated western China and, above all, their geopolitical interests in Syria and in the whole Middle East region.

Interventions and the State of Human Rights

Of the three cases of interventions, NATO's direct military intervention in Libya had a declared humanitarian dimension. It was primarily meant to save Libyan people from Gaddafi's abuses and atrocities. In the other two cases, Bahrain and Syria, even though human rights violations were of major concern to the West, this was not the decisive factor explaining Western engagement. Factors like regional competition for dominance and Western geopolitical interests trumped humanitarian concerns. The Libyans, both during and after NATO's intervention, have experienced a situation where minimum human rights remain a distant hope. They suffered at the hands of Gaddafi and also at the hands of the NATO forces simultaneously, though a difference should be noted here between collateral

civilian casualties resulting from NATO strikes and wanton killings by Gaddafi forces. The 2012 Report of the International Commission of Inquiry on Libya, set up by the UN Human Rights Council in 2011, has identified the Gaddafi regime, NATO and the opposition rebel forces as being responsible for committing crimes against the Libyan people.[5] It concluded that Gaddafi forces committed war crimes and crimes against humanity by murdering, torturing, unlawfully killing and systematically attacking common Libyans. It further reports that NATO had targeted civilian sites with no military value on five different occasions that resulted in numerous civilian casualties. NATO's five airstrikes on civilian sites took away the lives of 60 civilians and seriously wounded another 55 civilians (*Washington Post*, 2012). The BBC (2011) estimated that between 2,000 to 30,000 Libyans were killed during NATO's air campaign against the Gaddafi forces.

The commission has equally accused the anti-Gaddafi rebel forces of committing war crimes and breaching of international human rights laws. In August 2012, the rebels had torched the town of Tawergha, driving out 35,000 citizens of the town and killed countless people on the excuse that they supported Gaddafi during the armed conflict. This is a crime of genocide and ethnic cleansing committed after the fall of Gaddafi regime (Human Rights Investigations, 2011). More alarmingly, in the post-NATO intervention period, Libya simply descended into a state of complete chaos and violence. In the absence of a post-intervention effective central government to impose law and ensure security for the civilians, the different clashing armed groups occupied different parts of the country with little concerns for human rights and lives. In October 2013, armed militias abducted and then freed former Libyan Prime Minister Ali Zeidan that clearly spoke of the breakdown of the Libyan legal and political order (*Guardian*, 2013). In another incident in May 2014, armed attackers stormed the national parliament killing two and wounding more than 50 Libyans, which was a direct challenge to the legitimacy of the government (Al Jazeera, 2014).

Actions by the post-Gaddafi governments further shrank the space for human rights. The Libyan parliament passed a specific law in 2012 (Law no. 65) that imposes restrictions on citizens' right to peaceful protest and freedom of assembly. Another law, called the *Political Isolation Law*, approved by the parliament in May 2013, bars Gaddafi-era officials from holding public office, which can be used by the ruling party or coalition as a political tool to punish the opposition (Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, nd). The divisions between political and ethnic groups are simply widening. As of the writing of this paper, Libya remains a divided country headed by two competing governments, the Tripoli-based government led by the Libya Dawn coalition and supported by Qatar and Turkey, and the Tobruk-based government led by Operation

Dignity coalition and supported by the European Union, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (Al Jazeera, 2015a). The Islamic State has seized the opportunity amid the chaos to extend its control in the cities of Derna and Sirte (Al Jazeera, 2015b). In short, post-Gaddafi Libya is far from achieving human rights for its citizens or ushering in an era of human rights-based society.

In Bahrain, human rights remain in a state of mayhem. After the failed pro-democracy movements of 2011–2012, the Bahraini government has pursued more repressive measures to stamp out opposition groups and parties. Specifically, the killings and massive abuses of peaceful protestors by security forces during the movements had raised serious international concerns. The Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI), appointed by King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa in June 2011 to determine whether the government's response to the peaceful protests violated international human rights law and norms, came up with appalling findings. The BICI report, issued in November 2011, found security forces responsible for unlawful use of force, arbitrary arrests, tortures, illegal detention and ill-treatment of detainees.[6] The BICI report further asked the government to investigate and bring high ranking officials responsible for abuses to justice and release opposition leaders convicted unlawfully. Many of the protest leaders were tried by Bahrain's special military courts set up in 2011. Human Rights Watch (2013) mentions that the convicted leaders and activists were denied access to legal counsel and no credible investigation was carried out to determine allegations against them.

Furthermore, the Bahraini government passed anti-terror laws in July 2013 to "criminalize public demonstrations and free speech" (Abdullah, 2013). The anti-terror laws have followed the GCC Joint Security Agreement (JSA), approved by member states in November 2012. As a signatory to the JSA, Bahrain has already ratified it and is in league with other GCC states to implement it. Human Rights Watch (2014a: 1) has noted that the agreement is a step forward to "criminalize criticism of gulf countries or rulers" and "to infringe on free expression."

Serious violations of human rights, as a result, continue to characterize the Bahraini political environment. The embassy of the United States in Manama (2014) has identified two types of human rights problems in Bahrain: "most serious human rights problems" and "significant human rights problems." The first type refers to governmental intolerance of citizens' demand for peaceful change of regime, illegal arrests and detentions of protestors, and unfair trials of political activists. Significant human rights problems include impunity of security personnel who violate human rights, restrictions on civil liberties and freedom of expression and revocations of citizenships of protest leaders.

Syria has been the site of the worst case of human rights violations so far. The perpetrators are the government as well as the opposition rebel

fighters. Killings, torture and other abuses continue on different scales and for different reasons. The government troops and rebel fighters kill each other for political reasons while the Shi'ite-Sunni conflict, a perilous dimension of the civil war, has unleashed and abetted sectarian violence with dangerous regional consequences. The religious extremists have targeted the non-Muslims to eliminate or drive them out of Syria. The death toll of the civil war has already reached an incredible figure. *The Huffington Post* (2014) reports that, as of May 19, 2014, the total number of people killed in the civil war reached 160,000. The UN put the death toll at 100,000 in July 2013 but it stopped counting the deaths in January 2014, citing the impossibility of making accurate estimates in the war-torn country (Reuters, 2014).

The massive scale of killings does not totally depict the vast human sufferings in Syria. Some 7.6 million Syrians are uprooted from their homes or internally displaced and 3.88 million have fled the country to become refugees in neighbouring Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey (UNHCR, 2015), with waves of refugees swamping Europe from mid-2015. The UN Human Rights Council established the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syrian Arab Republic on March 22, 2011, to issue periodic reports on human rights conditions in Syria.[7] The first report, issued by the commission on November 23, 2011, accused the government troops and pro-government fighters of gross violations of human rights while the seventh report, made public on March 4, 2014, referred to mass casualties and starvation caused by sieges of civilian areas. Torture, killings, summary executions, arbitrary arrests and enforced disappearances are so widespread that they shock human conscience. Jonathan Miller, the UK-based Channel 4's foreign correspondent, referred to terror in Syria as "Syria's torture machine" and he compared it to "torture on an industrial scale" (2011: 5).

Not only were the government troops involved in industrial-scale torture and killings, the opposition rebel fighters have played an equally ugly role in such inhuman brutalities. Human Rights Watch (2014b) chronicles serious abuses, including kidnappings, torture, extrajudicial executions and merciless killings of civilians by the jihadist groups and allied foreign fighters. It looks like Syria has entered a blind alley where killings and abuses of humans are the rule of the day.

A related issue that has further aggravated the human rights conditions in Libya and Syria is that of sanctions, primarily enacted by the US and the European Union (EU) against the Gaddafi and Al-Assad regimes. Sanctions, which may precede or accompany armed interventions, are generally intended to alter the behaviour of an actor in question, promote human rights, prevent nuclear proliferations, check terrorist activities or bring down hostile foreign governments; a variety of instruments, such as asset freezes, severance of diplomatic relations, arms embargoes, foreign

assistance cutoffs, denial of air passage, visa denials, and so forth, are usually employed to realize the sanction objectives (Haass, 1997). More specifically, the sanction implementation tools aim at reducing the military capacity and weakening the political will of the target governments to refrain from human rights violations. Though the objectives appear harmless, sanctions, in reality, are counterproductive as they negatively affect human rights in the target states. The authors of sanctions, contrary to their aims, force the target governments to unleash more repression to hold onto power (Wood, 2008), worsening citizens' "physical integrity rights" through extrajudicial killings, political imprisonments and disappearances" (Peksen, 2009), and motivate target government leaders to repress opponents on the grounds that it is a "justifiable action" (Lopez and Cortright, 1997).

The Security Council Resolution 1970, adopted on February 26, 2011, imposed a number of sanctions, including an arms embargo on the Gaddafi government, travel bans on government leaders and asset freezes. The stated purpose of sanctions was to arrest violations of human rights by Gaddafi but that hardly dissuaded him from the use of force to retake Benghazi on March 17, 2011, just two days before NATO's air operations started. The waves of violence continued until the fall of the Gaddafi government in late October 2011.

Like Libya, Syria has also suffered from a series of sanctions before and after the start of the civil war. Engineered by the administrations of former George W. Bush and the incumbent Barak Obama, the US has imposed unilateral sanctions on Syria on different occasions, the most notable being the 2003 *Syria Accountability Act*, the 2011 *Syria Sanctions Act*, and the 2011 Iran, North Korea and the Syria *Nonproliferation Reform and Modernization Act*. These sanctions targeted the Syrian oil sector, denied foreign companies active in Syria's oil industry access to US financial institutions, and curbed access to nuclear materials (see Sharp, 2011). The EU also responded to the Al-Assad government's repressions of civilians by an imposing arms embargo, a visa ban on civilian and military leaders and embargos on Syria's energy sector (Portela, 2012: 2). Neither the US nor the EU sanctions, however, succeeded in stopping Al-Assad from using violence.

Conclusion

Military interventions to promote human rights and democracy are a messy and dangerous job. They often spawn counterproductive outcomes leading to an overall decline in the human rights situations in the target states. This argument of the anti-intervention camp of scholars is closely supported by the principal finding of this paper, which examines the massive violations of

human rights in Bahrain, Libya and Syria during and after the intervention period. NATO's intervention in Libya had the good intention of protecting the common Libyans from the threat of massacres by the Gaddafi regime but the end result was quite disheartening. The other two cases of interventions—Saudi intervention in Bahrain and multi-party intervention in Syria—were less driven by human rights issues and concerns. In both cases, the regimes in power were bolstered by their respective allies to execute more repressive policies, ruthless military actions against their peoples with hundreds of thousands killed, injured, internally displaced and forced to flee the country. In Bahrain, the Shi'ites are experiencing more economic deprivation and political suppression and, in some cases, loss of citizenship (NBC *News*, 2012). The opposition rebel fighters in Libya and Syria, with active armed support from the intervening powers, have also violated human rights by committing war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The geopolitical interests of the intervening powers have considerably contributed to a deterioration of democracy and human rights in Bahrain, Libya and Syria. The geopolitical factor had its stark manifestation at the regional level between Iran and Saudi Arabia concerning Bahrain and Syria. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia fiercely vie for regional dominance and influence in the Middle East and are deeply involved in the game of outmaneuvering each other. Their policies towards pro-democracy upheavals in Bahrain and Syria were critically conditioned by this dynamic of competition. Western intervention in Libya and the policies of China, Russia and the US towards the civil war in Syria were and are equally conditioned by geopolitical calculus. That clearly buttresses the idea that states' policies are driven or conditioned more by considerations of national interests, less by human rights concerns. The Bahrainis, the Libyans and the Syrians, as is obvious from the consequences, are undergoing untold sufferings and loss of their fundamental right— "the right to life, liberty and security of person" — on a daily basis. Lastly, the sanctions threatening the arrest of the violators of human rights has had no discernible impact on the Gaddafi and Al-Assad regimes in Libya and Syria, other than increase the economic misfortunes of the common people.

Notes

1 International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS), *The Responsibility to Protect* (originally published in 2001). http://responsibilitytoprotect. org/ICISS%20Report.pdf (10 May 2014).

2 Articles 138 and 139 in the *World Summit Outcome Document* declare the international community's collective responsibility to protect civilians from the four crimes and support actions under chapters VI and VIII of the UN Charter, http://www.un.org/wom enwatch/ods/A-RES-60-1-E.pdf (June 27, 2015).

3 Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's top military advisor Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi condemned Saudi intervention in Bahrain and reminded the Saudis of

similar foreign invasion of their own country. See, Fars News Agency, "Leader's Advisor Warns Riyadh of Dire Consequences of Bahrain Invasion." http://wikileaks. org/gifiles/docs/18/1869065_iran-ksa-leader-s-advisor-warns-riyadh-of-dire-conse-quences.html (May 11, 2014).

4   In February 2009, for example, an Iranian official claimed that until 1971 Bahrain was Iran's fourteenth province. This soon resulted in a diplomatic rupture between the two countries. See *The Telegraph*, "Bahrain as 'Iran's Fourteenth Province,'" February 17, 2009. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/wikileaks-files/8331615/BAHRAIN-AS-IRANS-FOURTEENTH-PROVINCE.html (May 15, 2014).

5   Report of the International Commission of Inquiry on Libya, 2012. http://www2.ohchr. org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/17session/A.HRC.17.44_AUV.pdf (May 13, 2014).

6   Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry. 2011. http://www.bici.org. bh/BICIreportEN.pdf (May 13, 2014).

7   Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic. 2011. http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/IICISyria/Pages/AboutCoI.aspx (May 15, 2014).

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