

Humanitarian Aid versus Humanitarian Intervention

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As stated in the lead article by Van Arsdale et al., the United States was aware of the 1988 genocide of the Kurds in the northern regions of Iraq, yet chose to do nothing in order to accommodate political and economic interests. If action had been taken, would the political and economic interests of the United States have determined which method of aid was offered? In the face of indisputable crimes against humanity, which is more beneficial – humanitarian aid or humanitarian intervention? What are some of the key differences between these two types of humanitarian assistance? What are some of the factors determining which path to take? These questions are addressed briefly in this commentary, in an effort to shed light on the political nature of human rights in the context of humanitarianism. By better addressing differences between humanitarian aid and humanitarian intervention, what it means for the state under duress and what it means for the state charged with responsibility to take action, perhaps the international community can better move forward to hold those involved accountable and form a more cohesive policy toward humanitarian assistance.

Complicating decisions as to when and where to act in terms of humanitarian assistance, there is no universal operational definition of humanitarian aid and intervention, and there is no singular humanitarian regime. These activities are highly contextual and open to interpretation. The International Meeting on Good Humanitarian Donorship has loosely defined humanitarian *action* as “guided by the humanitarian principles of humanity... impartiality...neutrality...and independence” (UNOCHA 2004). In addition, a definition of humanitarian action must include “the protection of civilians and those no longer taking part in hostilities, and the provision of food, water and sanitation, shelter, health services and other items of assistance, undertaken for the benefit of affected people and to facilitate the return to normal lives and livelihoods” (UNOCHA 2004).

Tangible human rights policies, linked to viable protocols, did not exist until after the decimation of the Jewish population and thousands of others in World War II.

The Role of the United Nations

In December of 1948, following the Second World War, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was adopted by the United Nations as the universal international handbook on human rights (United Nations 2009). At the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights held in Vienna, over 150 countries again reaffirmed their commitment to the UDHR, as explicated in the Vienna Declaration and Program of Action (Gleeson n.d.). Each member of the U.N. nominally recognizes the UDHR today; however, the rights inscribed in its pages are not always upheld.

Early on, international law regarding humanitarian intervention, as interpreted by the United Nations, emphasized peacekeeping and the rejection of an armed format; this was seen as inappropriately invasive. The United Nations stance, in brief, was summarized as: “Peacekeeping is a way to help countries torn by conflict create conditions for sustainable peace” (United Nations Peacekeeping 2009). While peacekeeping personnel comprise soldiers, police, and civilians, armed intervention was not viewed as a legitimate option. This stance has changed; the inability to exert “usable force” has become a security issue, and it has now been deemed a viable aspect of certain peacekeeping operations. This is to ensure the safety of the citizens whom the peacekeepers were sent to protect, as well as the peacekeepers themselves; however, it is to be used only as a last resort.

The mandate of contemporary U.N. peacekeeping operations is to “monitor and observe peace processes that emerge in post-conflict situations and assist conflicting parties to implement the peace agreement they have signed” (United Nations Peacekeeping 2009). These operations are not always employed post-

conflict; they may be employed during conflict in an attempt to facilitate the attainment of peaceful accords between conflicting parties. As such, the U.N. Security Council determines which missions peacekeepers will pursue as well as the course of action. The nations involved decide the number of troops to be deployed as well as the duration of their mission. Should such involvement be deemed unnecessary by the U.N. Security Council, authorization is given to "regional and other international organizations such as the European Union, African Union, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Economic Community of West African States, or 'coalitions of willing countries' to implement certain peacekeeping or peace enforcement functions" (United Nations Peacekeeping 2009).

One particularly large loophole of this system involves the process used to vote upon which operations are approved and which are denied. There are five permanent members of the Security Council: China, France, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Should one of them vote against intervention the proposed operation is shut down. Unfortunately, this is where politics can come into play. Since each of the five is a leading nation in the international community, each has significant economic, political, and/or social ties to many states. These circumstances may cause a member to vote against a mission that would put a bilateral or multilateral relationship in peril, thus disallowing the deployment.

The Complexity of Unilateral Humanitarian Intervention and Aid

It is possible for a nation to move forward on its own, as some tentatively considered as events in Kurdistan were unfolding. This is a complicated, as well as politically and economically dangerous, path to choose. As with the current crisis in Darfur, the United States has considered intervening in cases of crimes against humanity, but in idiosyncratic fashion. However, President Clinton's seeming disregard for the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 highlights the transnational circumstances that often prevent intervention, as well as (or in spite of) pressures placed by the public. While Clinton and the American public deemed the action in

Kosovo a success, the deaths of U.S. soldiers and general impact of the operation in Somalia caused a backlash that subsequently prevented action being taken in Rwanda. Despite Clinton's proclamation of a desire to intervene in cases of racial, ethnic, or religious decimation (Congressional Quarterly Weekly 2000), the reality was far different.

Under the umbrella of an overarching international committee that has weighed the pros and cons of intervention, intervention is more likely to be seen as a justifiable action in the context of international humanitarian law. By contrast, when working alone, a state must provide further proof of the viability of its plan, not only for the international organization but also for its own citizens. The argument is made that "warfare destroys lives, property, infrastructure, and environment," whereas "economic and diplomatic pressures do not" (Coady 2002). Thus many nations, the United States included, promulgate a general policy of intervening unilaterally only when their own national security is at risk.

At the risk of sounding cynical, in the world of humanitarian affairs, what a country says and what a country does often do not align. The failed humanitarian missions that the United States has engaged in have sullied the prospects of future interventions in the eyes of the public; Congress has brushed aside some meaningful debates in its effort to avoid internal conflict. While the American public in general seems supportive of humanitarian intervention, writ large, the implementation of such and the holding accountable of Congress often does not occur (Pevehouse 2008:2). The disconnect between the public's desire for humanitarian intervention and pressure on Congress to follow through, also speaks to the fear of the intervention becoming a gateway to using force "for the purpose of regime change" (Pevehouse 2008:4). As such, the American public historically has supported restraint, in concert with a wariness regarding any on-site implementation. Beginning with the high death toll and associated opposition to the war in Vietnam, internal criticism of the United States becoming involved in conflicts that do not directly affect its security or core economic

interests has been building. This has been further exacerbated by the current war in the Middle East engaged under the guise of democracy and development.

One theory of international development suggests that promising socio-economic development in a nation will ensure an increase in human rights and the effective recognition of violations thereof. The rights-based argument for development counters that, while socio-economic development may enhance political stability, without specific legislation on human rights (and associated enforcement mechanisms) it is possible that human rights will be abused as faster development is pursued and that development may be used as a curtain to hide the human rights abuses. Developed nations are less likely to be under public scrutiny concerning such abuses.

An additional barrier to the enforcement of human rights is the argument of state sovereignty. While not a main theme of this commentary it is an important topic in the field of human rights and must briefly be noted. Stated simply, other factors being equal, sovereignty trumps humanitarian intervention. While state sovereignty is to be respected and not abused in any sense of the word, an ongoing balance must be assessed between sovereign nations addressing their internal affairs, and the international community holding regimes responsible for atrocities they commit. Whereas upholding state sovereignty may be a valid reason to not become involved initially, in severe circumstances it is not a valid reason to prevent viable humanitarian intervention. For example, the current conflict and genocide in Sudan, which has caused an estimated 300,000-400,000 deaths and 2.5 million refugees and internally displaced persons, indicates an obligation to intervene and help those in need (Save Darfur Coalition 2008).

The arguments listed above against humanitarian intervention provide further support for those critics who support humanitarian aid instead. Humanitarian aid is a less invasive, and almost always less violent, way to offer help to an at-risk or suffering population. Many internal conflicts are linked to ethnic, religious, or political fractionalization.

Some – as could be argued in the 1980s regarding Kurdistan – may stem from a desire for complete annihilation of a group or its culture, while others may simply be the result of limited resources or dissatisfied civilians involved in new social movements. In cases such as this, humanitarians can engage efforts to alleviate the stresses associated with these limitations through the delivery of supplies and supportive services, such as mental health counseling. This might even make it easier for the conflicting sides to reach an accord.

Humanitarian assistance can also be a more viable option in terms of political and economic costs, since a nation is more likely to garner internal support for assistance rather than intervention. It is not perceived as an “invasion” but rather “help for those who are in the midst of conflict.” This also can be more economically sustainable for the external agents of change, as certain forms of assistance are less costly and time consuming than the training, deployment, and support of troops to the area in question. There is also the possibility that diplomats will be more supportive – political diplomacy and human rights advocacy can be partnered. To put these propositions to a brief test, this analysis comes full circle back to the case of the Kurdish population in the northern regions of Iraq.

Kurdish Genocide in Northern Iraq

The Kurdish genocide in northern Iraq in 1988 saw the death of approximately 180,000 Kurds and the displacement of 1.5 million more, as Van Arsdale et al. have noted. Saddam Hussein and his regime were able to inflict this genocide on the Kurdish people due, in part, to their informal alliance with the Iranians, as this gave them a shield of political motivation – the Kurds were then deemed enemies. While Saddam Hussein used this as an excuse to attack the Kurds in an effort to annihilate substantial portions of this ethnic group, the rest of the world conversely used this same alliance to justify their inaction. As stated previously, politics were involved in this debacle as at the time the United States was supporting Iraq economically.

It became increasingly apparent that the world was well aware of the situation in northern

Iraq. Unfortunately, it had not been declared genocide, so nations with the capacities to do so were not “obligated” to intervene. During this period, the situation became increasingly dire. As the Kurds began to flee their towns and villages in an attempt to escape Hussein’s troops, neighboring countries began to take note. The international community spoke up slowly and not forcefully until nearly four years after the Anfal campaign had begun. This avoidance of moral obligation in the face of economic and political barriers contributed directly to the deaths of thousands.

Eventually the United States set up a humanitarian aid effort to assist a small number of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), but this was done in part to appease neighboring countries. While this operation did lead to improvement in living conditions, it was too little too late. Had humanitarian aid been supplied much earlier, the casualties likely would have been much fewer. Respect for Iraq’s state sovereignty also was among the issues cited as a reason for delaying international action. Had state sovereignty not finally been pulled as a barrier, perhaps humanitarian intervention would have occurred, although this is merely speculation.

Conclusion

No one can say whether humanitarian intervention would have prevented the genocide of Kurds in Iraq, but the numbers of innocent civilians killed certainly would have been reduced. Some critics argue that external, transnational wars started over internal humanitarian crises inevitably lead to further deaths, as well as political and economic complications. Others argue that the moral obligation to recognize the systematic destruction of an ethnic group – and to prevent or stop it – far outweighs the potential economic and political complications.

The timing of humanitarian intervention is critical. In Iraq, such intervention, once engaged, could then have been preempted by humanitarian aid, if viable diplomatic channels truly were available and utilized. If humanitarian intervention were never an option, humanitarian aid should have been aggressively

pursued early on, using all available diplomatic means so that economic and political considerations would have been sustained. The much earlier use of humanitarian aid – if the regime had allowed it in – likely would have made a difference in number of persons killed. If the numbers killed were not minimized, this course of action likely would have forced the international community to uphold its obligation to take action against Hussein.

Unfortunately, this is all too often the outcome in cases of genocide: the world is aware of the situation, but sets barriers that effectively let it dodge its obligation to assist. Recognition of cultural and political factors, as well as notions of sovereignty and obligation – all covered in “Genocide, Ethnocide, and Ethnic Cleansing: An Exploratory Review” – is essential to better understand the roles of both internal and external actors concerning genocide and its aftermath. Until the international community binds together more effectively to enforce the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as was touted again worldwide as recently as 1993, the world will continue to allow such atrocities to happen. Perhaps we eventually will learn, but if the situations currently happening worldwide are any indication, that lesson will not be learned any time soon. ○

Notes

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