

Syrians Die While the World Dithers Irwin Cotler, Ottawa Citizen 29 November 2011 Eight months ago we already knew of the savagery in Syria yet did nothing. Indeed, four days after the first mass shooting - and after thousands had been detained - U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was still calling Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad "a reformer." Moreover, the Western response in the weeks and months that followed continued to be dithering and delay, matching the deafening silence from the Arab world. The only "action" came from Russia, which blocked United Nations reports on Syrian nuclear ambitions and threatened to veto any Syria-related resolutions at the UN Security Council.

The first U.S. sanctions - quite tepid ones - came on April 29, a six full weeks after the first Syrian call for freedom - and after yet another wave of massacres - with the European Union replicating the weak U.S. sanctions.

Finally, belatedly, after 4,000 Syrian civilians had been massacred and tens of thousands detained and many brutally tortured, the Arab League met in early November and set forth its conditions to Syria - asking for troops to be withdrawn from urban centres, demanding the release of political prisoners, calling for deployment of civilian monitors, and engaging with the opposition - but Assad responded to these demands with increased brutality and repression. The Arab League has since suspended Syria, and just this past weekend adopted unprecedented sanctions against Syria, including economic and financial sanctions, travel bans, and asset freezes; yet, the killing - including some 70 fatalities this past weekend alone - continues.

Simply put, the Syrian response continues to be more mayhem, more murder, more cruelty, more arrests, and more disappearances. Indeed, it now appears that all the conditions for invoking the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine exist in Syria, if they have not already been in place for some time.

At the UN World Summit in 2005, more than 150 heads of state and governments unanimously adopted a declaration on the Responsibility to Protect, authorizing international collective action "to protect (a state's) population from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity" if that state is unable or unwilling to protect its citizens, or worse, as in the case of Syria, if that state is the author of such criminality.

The doctrine was first referenced in the case of Kenya's postelection violence in 2007-'08. Earlier this year, the doctrine was invoked by the UN Security Council after the bloodletting in Libya.

Since the mass protests in Syria began, those seeking freedom and democracy have looked for international support and solidarity in their struggle against the murderous regime. Indeed, The

Economist headline in April should have already been the necessary wake-up call to act against Assad's murderous regime. But, inaction and indecision from the rest of the world have allowed the situation to escalate and a tenfold increase in civilian deaths - and detentions - has occurred as a result.

What is required now is a UN Security Council resolution - it is astonishing that no such resolution has yet been adopted - in order to implement the conditions of the Arab League and begin acting on our international legal obligations under the Responsibility to Protect. Indeed, last week's condemnation of Syria - the first action it has taken - came from the human rights committee of the General Assembly, a symbolically important move that is far short of the Security Council resolution required to implement R2P.

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