Book Review: Humanitarian Intervention and the UN

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Far from a ringing endorsement of UN interventions, Norrie MacQueen's text offers a measured outline of the varying success and failures of both the concept and reality of military deployment for humanitarian reasons.

Humanitarian Intervention and the UN. Norrie MacQueen. Edinburgh University Press. April 2011.

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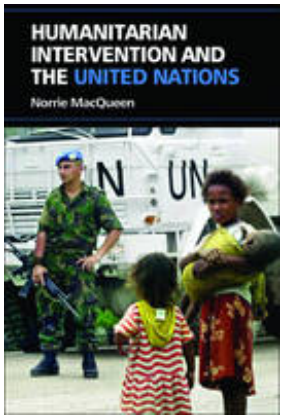

As news emerged last week of the death of Maummar Gaddafi after nine long months of conflict, western leaders have been relieved to claim a decisive military victory. Yet the success of the UN-mandated campaign against the deposed dictator's forces is not clear cut.

Norrie MacQueen's timely text questions conceptual and ethical aspects of armed humanitarian action and charts the evolution of UN humanitarian intervention – from the birth of the organization amid the humanitarian horrors of the Second World War through the development of policies key to Boutros-Ghali's *Agenda for Peace*: preventative deployment and post-conflict peace building. This accessible book illustrates that assessments of the 'success' of any UN military deployment will inevitably be clouded by competing interpretations of the aims and aspirations of any UN mandate and its resulting military deployment.

Presenting a full description of the evolution of humanitarian intervention, the text provides a historical review of the UN peacekeeping missions that preceded ideas of humanitarian intervention. For those who may be unfamiliar with particular cases of intervention, it charts all of the UN military action with the more prominent case studies, the Balkans, Rwanda and Darfur, in some detail.

An accompanying analysis of the 'rules' of international relations from the Westphalian system with the sovereign state as its core to the ambitions of the post-Westphalian world presents a skeptical view that the international system, as it stands, does not yet pride humanitarian responsibility above traditional spheres of power. Yet, if this is the direction in which the world is turning, something the author appears hopeful of, then such interventions in the name of humanitarian acts would need to be legitimised among international actors; something that the long-established, globally representative UN is uniquely capable of granting.

Yet, despite the UN's unique legitimating stance, as a collection of governmental representatives it is also frequently poised to pursue narrow national interests and can also be targeted for blame as a scapegoat when interventions fail to halt violence. The painfully realistic view that MacQueen takes when leveling criticism at the institution is then, despite its relative success or failures in an operation, the UN will always do no more or no less than the five permanent security council members will permit it to do.

MacQueen remains largely pessimistic on the chances of success of humanitarian intervention and argues a hard lesson; that some conflicts will not be solved by well-meaning intervention if they have not reached a stage that is favourable to a resolution pushed forward by external intervention. Although he documents the mid-1990s as a peak period of humanitarian interventions the author then acknowledges the effects of the disastrous US-led invasion of Iraq as a factor that brought the "ever-present dilemma of humanitarian intervention being seen as the bedfellow of western dominance into the sharpest of relief"[162].

MacQueen sees the barriers to intervention, sown by the failures of UN missions in the 1990s and consolidated by the invasion of Iraq, as deflating the more optimistic assumptions of multilateralism that accompanied the end of the Cold War. Acknowledging the complexity of motives behind each member state's willingness to engage in humanitarian action, the text concludes on a pessimistic note that the power of individual states and their national interests will continue to determine the possibility of interventions at all – an answer for those who question a hesitation to apply UN pressure to the current political conflict in Syria when success is claimed for the Libyan operation.

Determining the relative 'success' of a UN humanitarian mission is no easier. Competing definitions of

mandates, solely to reduce violence, maintain the international state system or establish meaningful and long-term nation-building institutions, is a conversation that deserves more in-depth thought and discussion than MacQueen allows it. In fact, the future direction of the UN isn't at all a focus of this book yet such a deliberation would serve the text well.

Despite its manifest weakness, the UN is MacQueen's "worst possible option – apart from all the others" to offer both legitimacy and capacity for humanitarian interventions [225]. Scepticism is a strong feature of the text, yet detail and historical context also have a prominent role in a discussion that is informative, if largely pessimistic, and lacking suggestions for the future development of such an invaluable institution.

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