

Arab Spring and Intellectual Intervention in Syria: Were the Revolutions Pro-Democracy Movements

Pranjal Kuli¹

¹ Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Political Science, North-Eastern Hill University, India

Pranjal.kmc715@gmail.com

HOW TO CITE

Pranjal Kuli (2026). Arab Spring and Intellectual Intervention in Syria: Were the Revolutions Pro-Democracy Movements
International Journal of Special Education, 41 (21s) 588 - 594

COPYRIGHT STATEMENT:

Copyright: © 2026 Authors.
Open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

ABSTRACT

The Arab Spring was a collective anti-government protest that swept the region of West Asia. The protests led to the collapse of multiple authoritarian regimes in quick succession, namely Libya, Egypt, Yemen, and Syria. Scholars and academics in the West were quick to raise concerns about human rights violations and labelled the protests as a pro-democracy movement against the authoritarian regimes. However, this classification of the revolutions is problematic. It represents a form of Intellectual Intervention by the West. Intellectual Intervention is based on Eurocentrism. Intellectual intervention portrays non-Western uprisings as pro-democracy movements. It influences how these uprisings are perceived in International Politics and lends legitimacy to actions taken by Western governments in the international system. The Syrian civil war began in 2011 following arrests of teenagers for criticising the then Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The conflict continued for 13 years and collapsed in 2024. This paper examines the Syrian conflict to determine whether the protests were truly pro-democracy movements or whether such classifications are a form of Intellectual Intervention to justify military intervention.

Keywords: Arab Spring, Syria, Intellectual Intervention, Military Intervention, Eurocentrism

1. Introduction

The Arab Spring protests began in Tunisia in 2010 after the self-immolation of a street vendor named Mohammed Bouazizi following repeated harassment from government officials. This sparked violent protests across Tunisia against Zine Al Abidine Ben Ali's government. Ben Ali was quickly ousted, and he fled to Saudi Arabia. The success in Tunisia acted as an inspiration for the people of neighbouring countries in the region. Similar protests quickly engulfed the whole region of West Asia and North Africa. These protests are collectively

known as the Arab Spring. Multiple regimes collapsed in the region in quick succession, namely Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, following similar anti-government protests. These countries reeled from high unemployment, corruption, economic stagnation, inflation, and prohibition of political thought and activity etc for many years (Philips, 2016). Protests were minor in countries like Kuwait, Iraq, Morocco, Algeria, and Saudi Arabia, etc. These countries were able to minimise the protests from turning violent and avoid regime collapse by

implementing quick reforms, especially economic reforms and monetary benefits. The slogan “ash-sha‘b yurīd isqāṭ an-nizām!” translated as ‘The people want to bring down the regime’ became commonplace and visibly prominent (Helleyer, 2013). Bashar al-Assad was confident that the Arab Spring protests wouldn't affect Syria and his government wouldn't collapse, as he believed his advocacy of pan-Arab unity and anti-American rhetoric would prevail despite economic challenges. The success and quick collapse of authoritarian regimes became both an inspiration and a guide (Philips, 2016).

Initially, Syria started with peaceful protests in 2011 after the arrests of the teenagers in Deraa for criticising the government (Alrifai, 2021). The initial protests began with the demand for their release and later turned into anti-government demonstrations after the teenagers were tortured and killed. Bashar al-Assad brutally crushed the subsequent protests following the death of the teenagers. Syria didn't attract external military intervention like Libya in its initial few years, as many believed that the Syrian government was on the verge of collapse or would collapse. Many believed that the brutal suppression by the Syrian government would attract external intervention following the lines of Libya. The Barack Obama administration was reluctant to intervene militarily, and the United Kingdom voted against intervening in Syria (Obama Archives, 2011). US intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 had radically changed US citizens' perspective on foreign missions abroad. The objective of the study is to examine whether the classification of Arab Spring protests in Syria as a pro-democracy movement was substantive or was an ongoing form of intellectual intervention.

2. Methodology

The study is descriptive and analytical. The study uses both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include Government Archives such as the Obama White House Archives, press releases by the US Department of State, UN Reports and Press releases, and Security Council Resolutions. Additionally, unstructured personal

interviews with Syrian journalist Wael Awwad and a humanitarian worker based in Damascus, Syria, provided insights on the Arab Spring and military intervention. Secondary sources include books and journal articles, etc. The data have been qualitatively analysed to understand the issues at hand.

3. Review of Literature

Alexis Heraclides and Ada Dialla (2015) shed light on the genealogy of the idea of Humanitarian Intervention, the discourse on the international law of intervention, and the Eurocentric nature of Humanitarian Intervention that is highlighted through the civilization-barbarian dichotomy. Thomas G. Weiss (2016) addresses the conflict between the norm and practice of Humanitarian Intervention and whether this new norm is set to bring with it ‘a new dawn or dusk for the practice of Humanitarian intervention’. Weiss argues that there have been continuity and change in world politics, from the emergence of peace operations in the 1990s and the subsequent normative innovation of the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ doctrine. Nicholas J. Wheeler (2000) highlights the change in norms in relation to the legitimacy of humanitarian intervention in the 1990s. The author highlights that the influence of the Pluralist international society and the Solidarist concept of international society has shaped Western interventions. The Pluralist international society emphasises respecting the rules of international society, whereas the Solidarist concept emphasises that states accept the moral responsibility to protect the security of their own citizens. Thorsten Gromes et. al. (2019) argues that studies on Humanitarian Intervention have primarily focused on historical roots, legal permissibility, and the ethics of humanitarian military interventions, among other things. Only a few studies have comparatively examined who intervenes when or with what consequences. Christian Pohlmann (2021) looks at the legality of intervention during massive humanitarian emergencies. He argues that R2P was an important step in justifying the right to intervene but fell short as the discourse on intervention moved towards Security Council authorisation.

David Chandler (2002) critically examines the emergence of emphasis on human rights in international politics. The UN and NATO interventions after the Cold War in Somalia, Iraq, Bosnia, and Kosovo are hailed as a result of a new 'ethical approach to foreign policy'. The author provides a rigorous critique of ethical foreign policy and its implications for interstate relations. He questions the Western world's sudden shift in prioritising human rights over state sovereignty. The author holds the view that ethical foreign policy empowers the powerful nations and their pursuit of interventionist policies.

Theoretical Framework

The question raised in this article is: Were the Arab Spring protests pro-democracy movements, or was it a form of intellectual intervention? Post-colonialism in international relations is based on the prevailing impact of colonialism and Eurocentrism in world politics. Post-colonialism argues that the modern international system, including the concepts of sovereignty and the nation-state, is a result of Eurocentrism that perpetuates inequality and sustains its dominance in the international system. Edward Said (*Orientalism*, 1979) argue that colonial powers justify Western dominance of the international system through the creation of knowledge. Post-colonialism in international relations explains the intellectual intervention in Syria and how, through continued reconfiguration and re-interpretation of international politics, i.e. military interventions are justified through intellectual intervention with concepts such as the standard of civilisation, mandate system, sovereignty as responsibility, etc

4. Pro-Democracy movement or Intellectual Intervention

In 2012, the then U.S. President, Barack Obama, stated that the use of chemical weapons would alter his policy of non-intervention and would authorise military intervention against Bashar al-Assad. In 2013, the White House reported that Bashar al-Assad had used Sarin gas in Ghouta against civilians, killing more than 1429 people, including 426 children (Obama

Archives, 2013). However, Barack Obama didn't launch any military intervention in Syria. In 2014, the Syrian people criticised Barack Obama, stating, "Obama! If you are incapable of saving the lives of Syrian children, leave the White House to a man to act like U.S. president" (Philips, 2016). The Obama administration launched military intervention in Syria codenamed Operation Inherent Resolve, with the primary objective of eliminating ISIS on 22 September 2014 (U.S. Central Command, 2014). The military intervention involved a coalition of multiple Western countries, namely France, Jordan, Canada, the United Kingdom, Turkey, Germany, Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Belgium, the United Arab Emirates, Morocco, Australia, the Netherlands, Denmark, Italy, etc. Syria became a case where the interests of international and regional players were being played out through direct airstrikes and proxy warfare through thousands of rebel groups fighting Bashar al-Assad. Russia intervened in Syria after an official request from Bashar al-Assad for military support (Chappel, 2015). Iran provided knowledge on how to handle demonstrations, training of troops and financial support to Bashar al-Assad, as Iran and Syria have been historically strategic partners.

The West have always claimed the right to intervene in the name of humanity. Intervention in the name of humanity can be traced back to the works of Emer De Vattel and Grotius. Vattel (1844) wrote, "If tyranny is carried to an utmost height, becomes unbearable as to cause the Nation to rise, any foreign power is entitled to help an oppressed people that have requested its assistance". The first military intervention was carried out in 1829, in the Greek War of Independence against the Ottoman Empire. Countries like France, the Russian Empire, and the United Kingdom justified their intervention in the name of protecting the Christian population in the Ottoman Empire (Evenstein, 2020). The West conceptualised the 'standard of civilisation', according to which "non-European and non-Christian civilisations were considered primitive, barbarous, and therefore infringements on their sovereignty were

acceptable". Hugo Grotius argued that "non-Christian rulers don't hold full rights to sovereignty" (Grotius, 1625). The standard of civilisation was the first form of intellectual intervention. Evenstein argued, "the Greek War is the classic version of 'humanitarian intervention' as a legal instrument where moral narrative took precedence over the historical record" (Evenstein, 2020). The second form of intellectual intervention was the Mandate System. After the devastating World War I, the League of Nations (1920) created the Mandate system, which legitimised the Mandate powers, who were the victors of World War I, as the gatekeepers of sovereignty of former Ottoman and German territories. Article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations stated, "advanced nations who by reason of their resources, their experience or their geographical position can best undertake this responsibility, and who are willing to accept it". The League of Nations dissolved quickly as it couldn't prevent World War II, which led to the foundation of the United Nations in 1945.

The United Nations refrained all member states from using force, except self-defence, under Article 2 (4) of the UN Charter. The article read as, "All members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state or any other manner inconsistent with the purposes of the United Nations". New states gained independence in Asia, Africa and Europe following the end of the Second World War. These newly independent states were ethnically diverse and saw extreme violence, ethnic violence, civil wars, and genocide, etc. Examples include the genocide against the East Pakistan crisis in 1971, the 1983 Sri Lankan Civil War, etc. To prevent such events of mass violence, the West advocated for military intervention on humanitarian grounds. Michael Walzer calls these events that "shock the conscience" of people (Walzer, 1977).

Taylor Seybolt (2008) defines military intervention as "the threat or use of force across state borders by a state or group of states aimed at preventing or ending widespread and grave

violations of the fundamental human rights of individuals other than its own citizens (due to violence), without the permission of the state within whose territory force is applied, and the use of military personnel to assist the delivery of humanitarian aid to people in need". The advocacy of humanitarian military intervention caused apprehensions among the countries of the Global South. These states saw humanitarian military intervention as a legal means to violate the sovereignty of comparatively weaker states. Noam Chomsky (1999) and Anne Orford (2003) see military interventions in third-world countries as neo-colonialism and neo-imperialism. Commenting on the concerns over violations of sovereignty, the former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan stated that states can no longer commit atrocities against their citizens using sovereignty as a shield to thwart military intervention. In 2001, the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) released a report titled Responsibility to Protect (R2P), which deliberated on the concerns of humanitarian military intervention and violations of sovereignty. The report argued that sovereignty entails responsibility, and states are responsible for protecting the fundamental human rights of their citizens. Sovereignty is not something that is given and absolute, but states gain sovereignty from their people. This is the third form of intellectual intervention. Humanitarian interventions have become acceptable in recent times as long as they are carried out with a UN Security Council mandate.

The Arab Spring protests began after years of economic troubles, inflation, corruption, repression and restriction of political freedoms, etc. The West argued that the Arab Spring was a pro-democracy movement and that the people were revolting against the authoritarian regimes after years of suffering. The conflict in Syria is seen as the historical sectarian war between the Shia and the Sunnis, but the West and the Gulf countries were equal partners in continuing and prolonging the Syrian conflict. However, many have described Syrian society as secular, and the former presidents Hafez al-Assad and Bashar al-

Assad curbed communal tensions. Besides small skirmishes between the Shia and the Sunni, both sects live peacefully. According to a humanitarian worker, Syria was one of the most “progressive countries and harmonious societies in the region”. The humanitarian worker argues that before the 2011 Arab Spring protests, sect was immaterial for the Syrians. Nobody asked anyone’s religion and married inter-religiously. The humanitarian worker argued that Syrians believe that the roots of the quick transition of the protests in Syria to violence have surely been instigated by outside forces. However, Syrians don’t deny that the root was allowed by the people themselves to be exploited.

The people of the region don’t have a favourable opinion of the US humanitarian saviour missions. According to a humanitarian worker, the people of the region believe that such missions have pushed countries back centuries. The US invasion of Iraq and the destruction had made a deep impact on the Syrians. Former US Secretary of State Colin Powell, after the invasion, admitted that his intelligence on Iraq’s possession of weapons of mass destruction was a blot on his record. The Syrian people sympathised with the suffering of the Iraqis and openly welcomed Iraqis who sought refuge in Syria. According to a humanitarian worker, “the ummah resonates among the people despite the extent of fracture in the society”. Therefore, the Syrian people were hurting, seeing the suffering of the people of Iraq. Waiel Awwad argues that human rights and democracy are just pretexts for intervention. The US allows states with the worst human rights records as long as they are aligned with US foreign policy. Waiel Awwad states, “The US creates a devil that demonises people to make people rally against the devil”. The US becomes the saviour and intervenes in the name of eliminating the devil.

According to a humanitarian worker, Bashar al-Assad was brutal, but US support of the current Syrian president, Ahmed al-Sharaa, who was a former prisoner and a designated terrorist of the US, contradicts their War on Terrorism. The peaceful protests against the Bashar al-Assad

regime were exploited using the sectarian fault lines and crippling sanctions to cripple the Syrian people and cause resentment against the Bashar al-Assad government. Waiel Awwad argues that when the economic sanctions on the Syrian economy crippled the Syrian people, they started seeing the Bashar al-Assad regime “as elites who have stolen government money, and this caused resentment among the people”. If sanctions were meant to punish the regime for its humanitarian violations, why didn’t the regime collapse in Syria? The demonstrators were armed by the US and the Gulf states to create instability in the country, which complements the intellectual intervention of classifying the peaceful Arab Spring protests in Syria as pro-democracy movements.

5. Conclusion

The Arab Spring protests in Syria were a movement against Bashar al-Assad to overhaul and restructure the political and economic system. The Syrians have lived under extreme suppression of political freedom to the extent that the expression of political opinion was considered going against the state. Their inspiration came from the collapse of multiple authoritarian regimes in the region. The Syrians don’t believe that the West, especially the U.S., militarily intervened in other states with a noble idea to uphold human rights. The Arab Spring protests in Syria have characteristics of a movement for political rights, but the Syrians, however, do not welcome military intervention by the U.S. The Syrians have blamed themselves that Syrians sold themselves and that internal divisions were allowed to be exploited by outside powers to militarily intervene. They express remorse over the situation in Syria. Through intellectual intervention, military actions could be justified in the name of upholding human rights, democratic governance and fighting terrorism. However, not every Syrian was against the Bashar al-Assad regime. The protests started in the rural areas, and the urban areas remained peaceful. The justification of pro-democracy movements is one form of intellectual intervention to legitimise military intervention long before the actual

military intervention is carried out. The protests are exploited to the extent of instability, enough to cite military intervention in the name of human rights and democracy. This article traces the trajectory of intellectual intervention from the Standard of civilisation, the Mandate system,

R2P, and pro-Democracy movements as forms of intellectual intervention. Pro-democracy movements are a part of the interpretation and reconfiguration of international law to justify Western actions in the international system.

6. References

A. Archives

Obama White House Archives (2011). Remarks by the President on the Way Forward in Afghanistan. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/06/22/remarks-president-way-forward-afghanistan>.

Office of the Press Secretary (2013). Government Assessment of the Syrian Government's Use of Chemical Weapons on August 21, 2013, *Obama White House Archives*. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/08/30/government-assessment-syrian-government-s-use-chemical-weapons-august-2>.

U.S. Central Command (2014). Sept. 23: U.S. Military, Partner Nations Conduct Airstrikes Against ISIL in Syria. <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/News-Article-View/Article/884858/sept-23-us-military-partner-nations-conduct-airstrikes-against-isil-in-syria/>

B. Books

Chandler, D. (2002). *From Kosovo to Kabul and beyond: Human Rights and Humanitarian Intervention*, Pluto Press.

Chomsky, N. (1999). *The New Military Humanism: Lessons from Kosovo*, Common Courage Press.

Evenstein, M. S. (2020). *A History of Humanitarian Intervention*, Cambridge University Press.

Grotius, H. (1625). *On the Law of War and Peace*.

Heraclides, A., Diallya, A. (2015). *Humanitarian Intervention in the late 19th century: Setting the Precedent*, Manchester University Press.

Orford, A. (2003). *Reading Humanitarian Intervention: Human Rights and the Use of Force in International Law*, Cambridge University Press.

Pohlmann, C. (2021). *Unauthorised Humanitarian Interventions in World Politics: An Assessment of Their Impact on International Society*, Springer.

Philips, C. (2016). *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the Middle East*, Yale University Press.

Seybolt, T. B. (2008). *Humanitarian Military Interventions: The Conditions for Success and Failure*, Oxford University Press.

Walzer, M. (1977). *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, Basic Books.

Weiss, T.G. (2016). *Humanitarian Intervention: Ideas in Action*, Polity Press.

Wheeler, N. J. (2000). *Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society*, Oxford University Press.

Said, E. (1979). *Orientalism*, Vintage Books.

C. Articles

Alrifai, O., Zelin, A. (2021). Protests in Daraa, Syria Undermine Assad's Narrative of Victory. *The Washington Institute*, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/protests-daraa-syria-undermine-assads-narrative-victory>

Chappel, B. (2015). Russia Begins Airstrikes in Syria After Assad's Request, *NPR*, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/09/30/444679327/russia-begins-conducting-airstrikes-in-syria-at-assads-request>

-
- Gromes, T., Dembinski, M. (2019). Practices and outcomes of Humanitarian Military Interventions: A new data set, *International Interactions: Empirical and Theoretical Research in International Relations*. 45 (6), 1032-1048. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03050629.2019.1638374>
- Helleyer, H.A. (2013). The Revolution Continues - No Longer a Slogan in Egypt, *Brookings*. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-revolution-continues-no-longer-a-slogan-in-egypt/>
- Vattel, E. D. (1844). The Law of Nations or the Principles of the Law of Nature applied to the Conduct and Affairs of Nations and Sovereigns. https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/ll/llmlp/DeVattel_LawOfNations/DeVattel_LawOfNations.pdf