

It's time to remember Responsibility to Protect

By: Kate Ferenchick

March 6th 2026.

The debate over humanitarian intervention has haunted international politics for years. When outside powers intervene to limit and stop atrocities, they usually violate international law. However, when they fail to act, they risk enabling further crimes. The current U.S. and Israeli joint mission in Iran has made me wonder: At what point is foreign intervention acceptable to stop further crimes against humanity? I acknowledge that the airstrikes are for beyond humanitarian reasons, but due to the Ayatollah's actions for the past 47 years, it is critical to address this perspective as well. To start, I look at this through a historical lens.

I took a class on political violence, one case focusing on the Yugoslav wars. The 1995 Srebrenica massacre, also known as the Srebrenica genocide, saw Bosnian Serbs murder over 8,000 Bosniak Muslims. While UNPROFOR troops were present on the ground, they terribly failed to stop this, leading to NATO airstrikes that led to the Dayton Accords. Just 4 years later, NATO once again intervened to end the attempt to ethnically cleanse Kosovo Albanians by Slobodan Milošević's regime, airstriking military positions. It was successful, and most likely stopped thousands of unjustified deaths. This event however, not approved by the UN or U.S. Congress, created controversy on its legality.

What led to this choice to intervene in a humanitarian cause?

A year prior to the Srebrenica massacre, almost 1 million Tutsi civilians were systematically killed at the hands of Hutu extremists, with little action done by the international community. General Roméo Dallaire, commander of the United Nations peacekeeping forces, warned about this event before and during, pleading for intervention. At the start of genocide, however, the UN voted to reduce UN peacekeeping force in Rwanda from 2,500 to just 270 soldiers. The United States, reflecting on their failed humanitarian intervention in Somalia just a year ago, chose not to intervene individually as well. After the 100-day genocide, the U.S. and international community were under heavy criticism for failure to intervene.

These cases lead to the question that is haunting the international community currently about when intervention is appropriate, and when it is "acceptable" to break international law for humanitarian causes. Before I continue, I want to address the added complexity of the Iranian airstrikes by the United States and Israel. President Trump has cited other objectives, rather than just liberating oppressed Iranians that have been stuck under a murderous regime for 47 years, such as destroying the Iranian navy and their nuclear sites. However, for many Iranians, the killing of the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei came as a relief, and a possibility for a new, free Iran. I

want to look at the issue through this lens, analyzing the balance between international law and preventing further attacks.

For context, during the protester crackdown by the regime on January 8th and 9th, over 30,000 Iranians were killed, each individual hoping for a better and more free Iran. In 2 days, 30,000 people were killed, a massacre. A previous NYTimes opinion piece showed Iranian doctors that risked their lives to show photos from the crackdown, with many patients having numerous bullets in their heads and broken bones. The Ayatollah's government has shut off the internet for almost all of their population, and have been terrorizing their citizens for the last 47 years, forcing thousands to flee their homes. Protesting and rising up is almost a guaranteed death sentence in Iran, and many have few options to oppose this repression. Knowing these statistics leads to a question that has divided nations, individuals, and groups: When is intervention acceptable, and how?

I too am aware of the risks this attack on Iran holds, and the legacy the long wars of Afghanistan and Iraq have on Americans and NATO fighters. The attacks have violated international law. At the same time, I can acknowledge the devastation the Ayatollah has brought on millions of Iranians, and how foreign intervention may be seen as necessary to change the situation. The question is impossible to answer, as each has a different view. For example, Spain has strictly condemned these attacks while avoiding discussing the previous actions of the Ayatollah, while Canada has supported the airstrikes in order to prevent the regime from gaining nuclear weapons. The international community is divided on if this action was justified or not, often citing international law versus humanitarian concerns, both in terms of Iranian citizens and world stability.

Historically, the line between taking humanitarian action and following international law has been blurred. The bombing by NATO of Yugoslavia was not following international law, but most likely prevented further atrocities, while the lack of intervention in Rwanda shows the failure of the international community in protecting humanity. This leads to the complex question surrounding the two forces, and is further complicated by Trump's objectives that do not explicitly state humanitarian worries. This article is not meant to defend or support any view on the current actions by the U.S. and Israel in Iran, but raise questions and thoughts on past and current situations focused on humanitarian missions through military intervention.