



Insight

# The UN and the Arab Spring

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Every September, the world's attention shifts to the United Nations as the General Assembly (UNGA) begins its annual session in New York later this month. President Obama is slated to attend, as will scores of other world leaders. This makes September an appropriate time to take a look at the United Nations and its role in advancing America's interests, and this column will seek to do that over the next several weeks.

This week's article explores the effectiveness of the United Nations in addressing issues related to the popular uprisings through the Middle East. A few observations:

**At the UN Security Council, the more things change, the more they stay the same.** Some UN enthusiasts may be tempted to exaggerate the role of the UN Security Council (UNSC) in responding to the crises in the Middle East, and imagine the dawn of a new era of international cooperation led by the UN. True, the UNSC managed to pass a resolution authorizing the use of force in Libya, which was no small feat. Yet Libya has been the exception rather than the rule (largely due to Qadhafi's unpopularity among world leaders outside of Africa and a couple of Latin American populists). Aside from a non-binding statement, the UNSC remains largely paralyzed over Syria, unable to reach consensus on economic sanctions and other actions far short of what was done in Libya. Nor have crises in Bahrain or Yemen spurred the UNSC into action.

Some observers are enthusiastic about the Libya resolution's implications for a relatively new UN doctrine called Responsibility to Protect (R2P). R2P means that a state has a responsibility to protect its population from mass atrocities, and holds that if a state cannot or will not do so, the international community should take action. The Libya resolution's focus on protecting the civilian population certainly seemed to operationalize R2P. However, if R2P truly were an accepted international norm, it would be applied in other cases of government atrocities, such as Syria or Sudan. The UNSC's selective use R2P to justify a military intervention based on other interests demonstrates that this doctrine hasn't exactly revolutionized the way the international community responds to crises. And that isn't necessarily a bad thing – we simply cannot intervene in every situation and always need to weigh other factors.

The main thing that hasn't changed at the UNSC is the veto power of Russia and China, and the two countries' reluctance to confront bad actors in the international system. In the case of the Libya resolution, Russia and China agreed not to veto, but they didn't vote in the affirmative either. They have since expressed regret, and as other matters like Syria come before the Council, they remain difficult to persuade. The lesson is that while UNSC blessing may contribute to the perceived legitimacy of an effort, the lack of a Security Council resolution

doesn't necessarily discredit a cause; it may just reflect the obstinacy of two countries that often don't share our interests.

**UN action can unnecessarily complicate matters.** Eager as internationalists may be to see the UNSC act on a situation, not every action has been helpful in bringing the conflict to a close. For example, the arms embargo meant to apply to Qadhafi's forces apparently precluded countries from aiding the rebels. The UNSC's referral of Qadhafi and some of his leadership to the International Criminal Court made it impossible for them make a graceful exit because they face arrest warrants. UN Special Envoy al-Katib's efforts toward a ceasefire were well-intentioned, but could have merely prolonged the stand-off had they succeeded. UNSC action in freezing Qadhafi's assets seemed like a good idea, but now it has made releasing the assets to the new government extremely cumbersome.

In working through the UN on future crises, the U.S. should seek to avoid such unintended consequences.

**Even on Libya, consensus wasn't as strong as it might appear.** Libya might seem to be a model of UNSC cooperation. Yet different countries had different interpretations of exactly what was authorized by the resolution. The way it was written seemed to suggest a purely defensive role for NATO, which was the apparent understanding of China, Russia, and others. Once NATO became more aggressive in targeting Qadhafi's forces and bombing his compound, some countries that had acquiesced on the resolution protested that this was not what they had in mind. As a consequence, the sleight of hand used to pass such a resolution is unlikely to work a second time.

In large measure because he worked through the UN and other international organizations, President Obama has been credited with assembling a large coalition for action in Libya. However, it should be noted that the coalition in Iraq included twice as many countries, even though it lacked explicit UNSC authorization. UNSC authorization, thus, can contribute to broad coalition but is no guarantee of it.

Moreover, given the weakness of the consensus on Libya, we should not be surprised when the Security Council fails to reach agreement on other crises. We simply have not entered a new era in which the countries of the world will always unite for common action. This means the U.S. will not always be able to hold out on acting in its interests until the UNSC gives its blessing.

**The Secretary General and his envoys have a mixed record.** The Security Council isn't the only UN component involved in the Arab Spring. Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon has tried to stay on top of the unfolding crises. To his credit, his statements generally have been on the side of freedom, despite the

constraints he faces as the head of an organization that counts scores of despots among its membership.

However, the Secretary General's use of Special Envoys hasn't been particularly consistent or successful. His Special Envoys to Libya, Yemen, and Bahrain were unable to get traction for political solutions. He hasn't even appointed a Special Envoy for Syria. Now Ban has dispatched a second Special Envoy, Ian Martin, to Libya to help the new government assess its needs and figure out how the UN can help – tasks for which the UN may be better equipped.

**At least the UN avoided complete embarrassment on human rights.** The United Nations' track record on human rights rightly has been criticized for letting the world's worst offenders off the hook while zeroing in on Israel alone. When the Middle East ignited earlier this year, Libya had shamefully been a member of the Human Rights Council, helping to discredit the body. In unprecedented fashion, however, the UN General Assembly voted Libya off the commission. Incredibly, Syria then began a campaign to fill the vacancy, but fortunately was dissuaded. Complete embarrassment was avoided.

The Council also convened a special session on human rights abuses in Syria and dispatched a fact-finding mission "to investigate all alleged violations of international human rights law and to establish the facts and circumstances of such violations and of the crimes perpetrated, with a view to avoiding impunity and ensuring full accountability." The UN's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights conducted the mission and came back with a report and various recommendations.

Reporting on human right abuses is valuable in cases in which a country can be shamed into cleaning up its act or perpetrators can be held accountable. It also can help to build consensus for action. While this exercise did help bring some additional attention to the atrocities in Syria, its ultimate effectiveness will be determined by whether it elicits a meaningful response from the international community. So far, that has been lacking.

**Can the UN help get these countries back together?** As countries like Egypt, Tunisia and Libya transition to new governments, UN agencies intend to play a central, though more low-key role. The UN's technical expertise in elections, coordinating function for humanitarian relief, and security training assistance will be called upon.

It is too early to judge the UN's effectiveness in helping these countries pick up the pieces, but in many ways, achieving stability after such upheaval will be more critical than the regime change itself. U.S. policymakers should closely monitor these less-than-glamorous UN agency efforts – not only do we have a substantial

financial investment in them, but we also have an important stake in their results.

**In the final analysis, the UN's approach has been just as disjointed and inconsistent as America's.** Just as the Obama Administration has lacked a coherent approach to the Middle East upheavals, so too has the UN's response been marked by inconsistency. Bloodshed in Libya has been handled differently than bloodshed in Syria. Bahrain and Yemen have received only intermittent attention. Crises in Egypt and Tunisia unfolded too quickly for the UN to play a role in their respective transitions.

Far from setting a new precedent for humanitarian intervention, the UN's actions on Libya were unique, confusing, and in some ways self-defeating. The on-going crisis in Syria represents the UN's next opportunity to demonstrate its relevance in resolving conflicts and protecting civilians. However, we should not harbor unrealistic expectations about the UN's ability to end these crises. In the final analysis, the UN's most important accomplishments in the Arab Spring may turn out to be the day-to-day work of its specialized agencies in helping new governments gain legitimacy and meet the needs of their people.

When President Obama first spoke before the UNGA in 2009, he said, "... the United Nations can be an institution that is disconnected from what matters in the lives of our citizens, or it can be an indispensable factor in advancing the interests of the people we serve." The UN's response to the unprecedented upheavals rocking the Middle East today will test which one it is to be.