Foreign Interventions in Civil War

Topic Background

While the causes of war broadly are the source of entire fields of study, the causes of civil war are another story altogether. Instead of external forces and outside state actors causing conflict, civil war comes from internal conflict. Civil wars involve two or more sides trying to take control of the country or somehow change the government currently in power. Thus, civil wars by definition are conflicts between non-state actors.

The question at hand is how to handle potential foreign interventions in civil war. This is when outside states become involved in the situation, directly or indirectly, and therefore changing the course of the civil war for one side or the other. Questions arise for how to support or affect the civil war, who should be supported, and who should be the ones giving the support. The other major option is to call for peace talks and have sides come sit and discuss an end to the conflict or at least a potential ceasefire.

To understand how to intervene in civil wars, the causes of civil wars need to be considered. One study came from Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler when they described civil wars as originating from either greed or grievance. Some severe forms of grievances may be found in “high inequality, a lack of political rights, or ethnic and religious divisions in society.”^2 These would be some reasons why people would form into a rebellious organization to counter the government in power.

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This can be seen in the earliest days of the Syrian Civil War because Syrian citizens were discontented with the Syrian government. The other side of this theory comes from potential opportunities for individuals or groups to seize power for themselves in a potential conflict, so they start war. Opposition to this theory comes primarily from David Keen where he says that civil wars are more complex than singular reasons, and therefore cannot be characterized by one particular theory.³

These theories are significant because foreign states need to consider the reasons why they may intervene in a particular conflict. If there have been significant and valid grievances of the people, how will the foreign powers ensure that the post-war government does not commit the same grievances as the former governments?

There are a few other factors that have influence over a civil war and its ability to end. One is the time since the last civil war or conflict. The more recent a previous conflict, the more likely it is that a country will have a civil war and it will have similar causes to the previous conflict. A resurgence in conflict may also be due to the inability of a government or institution to uphold the ceasefire or agreement made during the previous civil war.⁴ It then becomes key for any foreign intervention to consider the causes of the failure, and then rectify these failures to ensure that any peace can last. Some examples of this occurred in Sudan, the former Yugoslavia, and Somalia.

When intervening in a civil war, states need to consider other factors such as religious differences, demographics, and how to recognize the government. While religion and demographics may not necessarily indicate if there will be a civil war, it is a significant indicator as to who may be recruited during the war. This is important to assess how the war may progress and how the sides will break down. Another issue is who the international community may recognize as the official government. The state still needs representation even during times of turmoil, so it becomes a question as to how the United Nations and individual member states will recognize sides as they emerge.

Foreign interventions must be cautious of potentially turning into proxy wars. These are conflicts in which major powers outside of the situation instigate or further a conflict without becoming directly involved. Thus, if foreign intervention does occur, the outside powers often choose which side to support. When this happens, if there are various outside powers, they could potentially be supporting two opposing forces in the civil war. This exact situation is ongoing in Yemen with Saudi Arabia and Iran supporting opposing sides.

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Past Actions

The United Nations established the Peacekeepers to ensure that given the need, the UN could take action and actively intervene in conflicts to promote a peaceful resolution. The UN began Peacekeeping operations in 1948 with the deployment of military observers in the Middle East in the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO).\(^5\) During the Cold War, the UN Security Council was frozen due to conflict to the two veto powers of the US and USSR, making peacekeeping nearly impossible. Thus, a new organization was necessary to carry out the work of maintaining ceasefires and borders. Operations were restricted to unarmed military personnel until the Suez crisis in 1956, with the UN Emergency Force which was supported by Canadian Prime Minister Lester B Pearson. After the Cold War, the nature of UN peacekeeping changed again, moving from external to internal conflict; with peacekeepers enforcing disarmament, demobilization, and rebuilding and reforming governments. From the 1990s through the present day, the UN has varied the intensity with which they pursue peacekeeping.

One of the major peacekeeping missions that received focus was the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda, or UNAMIR. The Security Council approved this by resolution 872 in 1993 to allow for peacekeeping forces to enter Rwanda and attempt peace between the warring Hutu government and Tutsi factions. Its original mandate included primarily monitoring the ceasefire agreement held true and assisting in mine removal.\(^6\) When the genocide began in April 1994, the mandate did not provide for intervention in the genocide, and so it continued for months without the UN intervening, allowing hundreds of thousands to die.\(^7\) Because of this lack of ability to intervene until the genocide was near complete, UNAMIR was largely considered a failure. Similar failure occurred in the multiple missions to the former Yugoslav states. Genocide also took place there, without significant direct intervention from the United Nations or the international community.

The Responsibility to Protect, or R2P, was developed following the failure of the international community to react to the atrocities taking place in the Balkans and Rwanda.\(^8\) These genocides were recognized as major failures of the international community because they explicitly did not intervene until it was far too late. R2P is key in the international realm for ensuring the protection of ethnic, religious, political and other protected groups from persecution from governments or insurgent forces. Civil wars are often the site of these mass atrocities occurring because the groups largely break down into groups that could have a mass atrocity committed against them.

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\(^7\)“Rwanda/UN: Acknowledging Failure,” AfricaFocus, http://www.africafocus.org/docs04/rw0403b.php
R2P is built upon three central pillars that ensure it remains effective. The first states that “every state has the Responsibility to Protect its populations from four mass atrocity crimes: genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing.” This encourages member states to prevent the four mass atrocity crimes within their own borders and build in the protections necessary to prevent them. The second is that “the wider international community has the responsibility to encourage and assist individual states in meeting that responsibility,” which means that states should assist other states in preventing the four mass atrocities. The last pillar, and the central protection and defense of R2P, is that “if a state is manifestly failing to protect its populations, the international community must be prepared to take appropriate collective action, in a timely and decisive manner and in accordance with the UN Charter.” This ensures that outside coalitions, the United Nations, or other states need to be prepared to take action against a state that is actively committing one or more of the four mass atrocities. The Security Council has invoked R2P in more than 65 resolutions since 2006. The Human Rights Council has also invoked R2P in 30 resolutions.9

The primary Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) this topic would fall under is SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions. The impact of civil wars creates instability around the world, and in particular the region the civil war is taking place. Goals 1, 2, 3, 8, 10 and 11 are also related as key drivers of ensuring that civil wars do not occur in the first place. While all other SDGs play into the origins and base of civil war, SDG 16 shows the final result and impact of not having peace, justice, or strong institutions. Civil wars are by their virtue the breakdown of peace and justice and a failure of institutions to uphold civil government.

Possible Solutions

As the international community, delegates must consider the conditions under which it is appropriate to intervene in civil wars and conflicts. The Responsibility to Protect has already been established as an internationally recognized reason to intervene in a sovereign state’s actions. The premise of this topic is such that foreign powers would be superseding a state’s sovereign right to govern itself, so it remains a question when it is appropriate to step in. There may be specific situations in which it is clear, and those will be assessed, but are there any far-reaching standards that the United Nations has not yet considered when it comes to foreign intervention in civil wars.

The next step, after deciding that intervention is necessary, is how the international community would intervene. The type of intervention is significant as it signals support for one side or for peacemaking efforts. This can come in the form of economic aid or sanctions, material assistance, military advisors or troops, and many more options to try and bring an end to the conflict. This is significant particularly when there are multiple factions that are supported by different foreign powers because it will be more difficult to reach a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

The last consideration is for post-war recovery and development once there is a conclusion to the conflict. This may come in many forms, but the end goal is still the same no matter the conflict: to prevent future conflict. The foreign powers can assist in any way they may allow, but a successful end of the conflict will be a sustained peace in the country. This will be a key question for delegates on how to balance current peacemaking operations and how that will transition into government building in the future.

There will be varying beliefs based primarily on country views of national sovereignty. This will be key as how states assess whether or not intervention is an acceptable option, and how much intervention is acceptable. There are some states that place the prime issue as one of the government's right to conduct its own affairs, and in these sovereignty emphasizing states, they would not advocate for foreign intervention in most cases, including R2P. But other states would be greater advocates of intervention. It is up to this body to decide when it is appropriate to intervene, how it is best appropriate, and future state-building.

Further Research

- United Nations Peacekeeping
- Goal 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions
- Responsibility to Protect (R2P)

Worksheet Questions

1. What is one cause of civil war?
2. Name a civil war that is currently ongoing.
3. What does R2P stand for?
4. What is a pillar of R2P?
5. Name one United Nations Peacekeeping operation considered a failure.