

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Helping the Syrians Help Themselves? The Ambiguities of International Assistance to the Rebellion

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This article examines some of the ambiguities of efforts to protect Syrian civilians by problematizing the agency of civilians in armed conflict. Based on an analysis of existing discourses of intervention, it underlines the extent to which civilians have been portrayed as largely defenseless victims, when at least anecdotal evidence suggests that civilian resilience has been significant. The article emphasizes the degree to which civilians themselves may strive for other things in the conflict than their sole 'protection,' thus complicating efforts at protecting them. In this context, one of the most pressing and difficult issues is conceptualizing the relationship of civilians to the rebellion and vice versa, as well as the possible means of intervention of the international community in assisting civilians' efforts. The article finishes by returning to civilian voices and analyzing how some civilian and grass roots organizations have propounded their own vision of what appropriate protection in the circumstances would entail. In the end, it may be that it is this form of political agency about the needs and vision of civilians that most needs to be heard.

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As the Syrian uprising enters its third year, it has dramatized a series of questions already raised in Libya around the legitimacy of rebellion against an abusive and authoritarian regime, and the role of the international community in supporting it. In parallel, an extremely grave humanitarian situation has unfolded as a result of the violence, leading to questions about how to best protect civilians. These questions have reached a burning point as suspicion that the regime is engaging in mass crimes grows. This article will seek to examine some of the interconnections between the rebellion, the international community and civilian stakes in Syria by using the reality of civilian resilience in

Syria today as its starting point. The issues seem hard to disentangle: what exactly is the role of civilians in protecting themselves? To what extent is the protection of civilians a goal of any of the involved parties? What should/can the international community do to protect civilians that does not represent undue interference in the affairs of a sovereign state? Can there be a space for humanitarian protection that does not involve taking sides in the conflict? What is the relationship between the goal of overthrowing the Assad regime and civilian protection?

These are political and practical questions of the utmost urgency, but they are also *normative* questions that imply a particular vision of what is at stake, who the relevant actors are, and what can be done to alleviate the suffering of civilians. In particular, the Syrian conflict raises complex theoretical

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questions about who should accept responsibility for civilians in a context where state institutions are either unwilling or unable to ensure security for all. I therefore propose to analyze some of the implications of a variety of discourses dealing with the Syrian crisis in an effort to show how they construct the respective roles of civilians themselves, the rebellion and the international community in relation to each other. My goal is to suggest that the best hopes for civilian protection in Syria probably lie neither entirely in civilian resilience nor in domestic or international efforts at help, but in something more complicated that marries elements of all of the above.

I begin by arguing that the international community has tended to portray civilians as largely defenceless victims, when at least anecdotal evidence suggests that civilian resilience has been significant. I then go on to problematize the notion of civilians and emphasize the degree to which civilians themselves may strive for other things in the conflict than their sole 'protection,' thus complicating efforts to protecting them. In this context, one of the most pressing and difficult issues is conceptualizing the relationship of civilians to the rebellion and vice versa, as well as the possible means of intervention of the international community in assisting civilians' efforts. I finish by returning to civilian voices and analyzing how some civilian and grassroots organizations have propounded their own vision of what appropriate protection in the circumstances would entail.

### **The International Community and Civilian Resilience in Syria**

The international community's portrayal of the Syrian events has evolved subtly and continuously throughout the uprising. Initially, the focus was on the 'Arab spring' element of the crisis, particularly mass protests against the regime. Demonstrators were praised as courageous citizens oppressed by the regime in ways that foregrounded their agency. For example, then French foreign minister Alain

Juppé emphasized at the 6710<sup>th</sup> session of the Security Council that 'the vast majority of Syrians [...] demonstrate [...] barehanded in the streets. [...] We respectfully pay tribute to those Syrian men and women who every day march for their freedom, knowing that the repression's bullets could kill them at any moment' (UNSC 2012, 15). The stress was placed on the rights of Syrians as citizens denied participation in a context of systematic violations of civil and political rights by the regime.

This vision of civilians as active agents of change in Syria began to change with the onset of armed confrontation. The active subject-citizens were gradually transformed into an undifferentiated mass of 'victims' whose agency was neglected and irrelevant. The 'rebellion' took centre stage as the more or less organized central actor in the struggle. 'Civilians' were frequently instrumentalized as part of a rhetoric reinforcing an interventionist agenda focusing on their powerlessness and meekness, and therefore the potential role of the Security Council or other international actors in rescuing them. Pathos was often involved, as in the Qatari delegate's statement before the Security Council:

We meet today under the watchful eyes of bereaved orphans, widows, thousands of wounded, detainees, displaced children, young people, the elderly and women who continue to hope for the support of the Security Council and thus to live a decent, free life based on right, justice and good governance. It is up to the Security Council – and its responsibility under United Nations Charter – to realize the hopes of the Syrian people (*ibid.*, 2).

In the background, a norm such as Responsibility to Protect (R2P) has powerfully reinforced a sense that, when the state fails by turning against its own population, the international community is left as the ultimate and only guarantor of civilian security, in ways that further sidestep the role of

civilians (Mégret 2009). Given the international community's inertia, the R2P concept has predictably entered a situation of chronic crisis, remarkably soon after being solemnly adopted (Keeler 2011).

The reality on the ground is of course more complex than the image of civilian passivity international activity suggests, and civilians in Syria were extremely reactive early on in the crisis, deploying a wealth of strategies to protect themselves. More precisely, civilian resilience can be said to arise, aside from the civilian population's sheer will to live, at the intersection of three phenomena that condition and structure it:

1. A government that has carried out a well-documented policy of systematically targeting civilians in an attempt to instil terror and suppress dissent, often on the basis of a broad association of certain sectors of the civilian population with the rebel movement.
2. A rebel movement that, as we will see, has at the very least an ambiguous role in relation to civilians, being both a force supposedly fighting for a large part of the population, yet one that is also a danger to them.
3. An international community that oscillates between claiming that it is only interested in civilian protection and expressing more forceful demands for regime change, but at any rate, is unable or unwilling to achieve either.

It is clear that the violence of the attacks on the general Syrian population leaves very little room for protection strategies that might have worked in other contexts. Protesting against massacres is simply no longer an option because the regime has shown it will not tolerate any protest, and in practice it would be difficult to disentangle protesting about civilian deaths, and protesting against the regime, or asking for its change. The emergence of neighbourhood 'defence groups' supposed to protect civilians is an interesting phenomenon, but a very ambiguous one.

Such groups have sprung up in some areas to compensate for the retreat of the state in certain neighbourhoods and the vulnerability of civilians to rebellion assaults. But they have also been constituted along ethnic or religious lines, and are thus protecting only *some* civilians. Through tit-for-tat killings, they may become part of the worsening libanization of the conflict (i.e.: its tendency to fragment into ever smaller hostile factions). Moreover, they operate with official tolerance and support and are therefore potentially co-extensive with the Syrian state's repressive apparatus, if only by freeing up forces that can be deployed towards the repression.

One of the most remarkable means of resistance and self-protection is arguably some of the grassroots journalism that is occurring on the ground by civilians, and which has often served a unique role in documenting atrocities, thanks to global virtual social networks. Solidarity amongst civilians, moreover, has probably proved to be one of the great planks of survival strategies. There is evidence, for example, that in bombed urban areas, families have regrouped in relatively safer buildings, often welcoming those whose housing had been destroyed. A range of other resources have been shared, including money. A number of 'civilian organizations' have also been at work although some, such as the Syrian Red Cross, are hardly grassroots organizations and have occasionally been suspected of being controlled by the regime.

As a result, a number of parallel social and medical services have emerged, which constitute a sort of very rudimentary shadow welfare sector in hiding. Clandestine hospitals, often managed from the private homes of doctors, have helped care for the wounded, the most notorious being Doctors Coordinate of Damascus, which started working in 2011 to treat wounded protesters who would have been at risk of torture and execution had they gone to official hospitals. These efforts at creating parallel state structures owe much to the ability of the population's grassroots mobilization, often on an ad hoc

and local basis, but with considerable ability to federate groups. Finally, aside from taking shelter, perhaps one of the foremost strategies of survival in Syria has been flight. Flight is a very ambiguous mode of self-protection. It often involves civilians abandoning all their property and putting themselves in very precarious situations. It is of two types, escapes to rebel-controlled areas and to neighbouring countries. As to the former, there is evidence that tens of thousands of Syrians are currently internally displaced or in neighbouring refugee camps. Although they often face difficult humanitarian situations in these areas, these are arguably an improvement from the constant threat of harm in zones of combat.

Despite the undeniable resilience of the Syrian population, efforts at self-protection remain limited when seen in isolation. Apart from the power and violence of the state apparatus, understanding the complexity of civilian resilience in a country like Syria requires a better understanding of the category 'civilians' and some of its ambiguities. There has long been a tendency in the humanitarian discourse to draw a rigid line between civilians and combatants based on the notion of 'participation in hostilities.' This distinction is understandable and useful from a protection point of view, but it can be more misleading in terms of the actual politics of conflicts, and understanding civilians' role in it.

'Civilians' in Syria is a relatively abstract term that might describe people at opposite ends of the political divide. There are presumably some civilians that are apolitical and neutral, although possibly not very many by this stage.<sup>1</sup> It is in fact fair to assume that most civilians have taken sides. There are pro-Assad civilians as well as pro-rebellion civilians. Within both categories of civilians, we have reason to believe that there are many sensitivities on the legitimacy of the struggle/repression, on the price one is willing to pay for either, and on what a post-conflict Syria might look like. These differences obviously do not make the idea of civilians

irrelevant, but it must be remembered that the category is no more than a convenient by-product of humanitarian efforts, one that can stand in the way of a more nuanced appreciation of reality.

Indeed, the blurring of the line between combatants and non-combatants is not simply a product of 'bad' combatants forcefully enlisting 'good' civilians or operating in dangerous vicinity to them. Civilians also have a role, occasionally, in their own 'de-civilianization,' for complex reasons of their own choosing. In fact, (self-)protection may not be the only goal that civilians pursue. Because civilians have stakes in the general ongoing political struggle, either for the status quo or for the overthrowing of the regime, they may become actively involved in supporting one side or the other. For example, the Local Coordination Committees and Revolutionary Councils, which come closest to grassroots civilian organizations, are clearly aiming at both protecting civilians and at fighting the regime, something which may blur their perception. In some cases, it may be particularly hard to distinguish between civilians and combatants in a context where combatants on at least one side are drawn broadly from the ranks of civilians, and where the categories are relatively fluid.

Civilians in Syria have undoubtedly been involved in various forms of non-belligerent logistical or intelligence support. As one recent article describes it:

Towns provide fighters. Residents help funnel food, supplies and ammunition to the front lines. And rebels engaged in the fight can find a safe refuge to rest and recuperate. [...] Every village has a base for the local battalion, where some rebels stay to patrol the countryside and those fighting in Aleppo can come back for a much-needed break before returning to the fray (Schemm 2012).

There have been cases where 'civilians' rose up to capture certain cities in close cooperation

with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) - in which case they would have briefly and technically become combatants for the purposes of the law of war. For example, the border city of Zabadani was briefly captured by its inhabitants in mid-January of 2012 before it was recaptured by the government on February 7<sup>th</sup> (Mistu 2012). During that capture, according to one source, the FSA was 'receiving money in the form of donations from the locals' (NOW Lebanon 2012). Interestingly, when a government offensive made the town impossible to hold, the FSA decided to send the heads of prominent families in the city to negotiate a ceasefire with the army (Sly 2012).

Although they may not actively engaged in combat or combat support, civilians may consider trade-offs between their personal security, their relatives' security and the pursuit of some broader political goal. For instance, some civilians may put a high premium on the overthrow of the Assad regime, even at a high cost to themselves or to their community; others may on the contrary prefer, all other things being equal, greater personal safety at the expense of expeditiousness in the pursuit of the overthrow. In this context, even the more seemingly passive stance may be rich with political implications. For example, some may choose to stay in a place where fighting occurs and where their life is put at risk for partly personal but also partly political reasons, a form of solidarity with the rebels or defiance of the state.<sup>2</sup> As such, it is important to remember that civilians are also political actors, albeit not armed ones. I will return to some of the global visions articulated by civilians for their security and the future of Syria, but suffice it to note at this stage that civilians will inevitably have their own views about what should be done that cannot be easily interpreted internationally.

The difficulties associated with identifying a common civilian stance can be illustrated by an examination of the attempt to articulate a 'civilian' vision for protection. Listening to civilian voices can in principle allow us to think of international efforts as related and even accountable to demands expressed

locally, rather than flowing rigidly and downwards from international norms and policies. The problem of course is that, strictly speaking, there is no 'civilian constituency' as a fully constituted whole in Syria today. In the highly polarized environment of the conflict, it would be very difficult to find pro- and anti-Assad Syrians overcoming their differences to come up with a common platform. Moreover, the pro Assad civilian constituency, even if it exists, cannot be expected to have an audible voice that is distinguishable from that of the government. Even the anti-Assad civilian constituency is very closely comingled with the rebellion.

Yet it is revealing that the Local Coordination Committees, the closest thing to grassroots civilian organizations, have emerged with a 'vision for local protection.' That vision borrows heavily from contemporary articulations of the idea of human security and the responsibility to protect, albeit with a local twist. Consider for example the following statement from the Local Coordination Committees, which makes the fundamental case for rebellion, but also highlights why the Syrian authorities cannot be relied on to protect civilians:

We affirm that respect of basic citizen rights is a defining attribute of sovereignty and statehood. Furthermore, respect of human rights is an essential element of a responsible sovereignty. The Syrian regime confronts the aspiration of the Syrian people to freedom and dignity with the commission of crimes against humanity. The Syrian regime has shot all doors on all inquiries into such violations, and on holding their perpetrators to account in an objective, fair and firm manner. Accordingly, such regime is not entitled to rely on the principle of Sovereignty to confront its own people. If it does so, it unsheathes yet another arm in the face of its own people, thereby exacerbating the bare condition of the Syrian people (LCC 2011).

An invocation of the right of self-determination follows which derives from international law and is deployed 'when the ruling regime fails to meet its international responsibilities, and when it persists in its violations of individual rights and human dignity.' Yet this is hardly an open invitation for the international community to intervene to 'protect civilian,' as in the dominant R2P discourse. In a key passage, the Committees argue that:

As we insist, in the present very special circumstances, on the direct right of the Syrian people to affirm its right of self-determination before the international community, *we assure that all calls based on the ground of 'droit d'ingérence,' 'devoir d'ingérence,' [sic] 'humanitarian intervention' or 'responsibility to protect' should not hinder the aspiration of the Syrian people to cause peaceful change by its own forces; or lead to dealing with the Syrian people as yet another sphere of influence in the game of nations...* The Syrian People does not want to substitute authoritarian rule by submission to foreign influence... As the Syrian People is revolting against its oppressive rulers, it will not hesitate to revolt against all forms of foreign domination (ibid.).

The Committees' communiqué concludes with a demand that 'the objectives of international protection must be limited to ensuring the safety of peaceful assembly and demonstration, so as to enable the Syrian people to freely exercise self-determination' (ibid.). This is a rather curious proposal in its very limited scope, but it is followed by a long list of ways in which such measures could be implemented. These include all 'necessary measures to prevent the supply of arms and all related materials to the Syrian regime,' and 'forcing the Syrian regime to immediately lift restrictions on all forms of media' (ibid.). In addition, the Committees ask for an investigation into offences committed,

as well as asset freezes and travel bans, a referral to the ICC, and free and universal elections. It also calls for transnational assistance, and the lifting of obstacles to money transfers that might assist the rebellion. The Syrian National Council (SNC) has also been wary of transfers of weapons to the opposition, because of the risk to civilians, although it has asked for equipment that would facilitate a greater coordination locally between civilian groups.

### **Domestic Protection, the Rebellion and Accountability**

As the prime political and military force representing (or at least acting in the name of) a very significant proportion of the civilian population, one might expect the rebellion to be ideally suited to complement and coordinate with protection efforts undertaken by civilians. International human rights and humanitarian law, which eschew nothing more than a normative void, would tend to apply at least in situations where rebel forces exercise quasi-sovereign functions, imposing certain duties on them to at least not directly harm civilians and, ideally, provide a modicum of security. If nothing else, the rebellion's legitimacy probably depends on showing what potential sovereign mettle it has, a battle for the hearts and minds of the Syrian population (particularly pro-Assad minorities or neutrals) which it has so far had difficulty winning. Indeed, the FSA arguably has its roots in an effort, particularly by some defectors, to more directly protect their community rather than straightforwardly participate in the overthrow of the regime. One of the FSA's stated principles is 'to protect Syria's civilians and to guarantee them a brighter future (FSA 2012).'

The FSA's protection role has translated into local, targeted initiatives beyond the broad goal of overthrowing Assad that clearly supplement civilian efforts. For example, there is a degree of security patronage that has been provided by the FSA in locales they control. In addition to the fact

that some rebel-conquered areas may effectively be free from the attacks of the government, rebels have also stepped in to provide minimum law and order where they have secured a foothold. As one rebel suggested, in the small villages that welcomed them 'We protect the bakeries and resolve local problems (Schemm 2012).' In the city of Zabadani, members of the FSA participated in an elected council and collaborated with the civilian authorities to ensure the city's security (Mitsu 2012). Moreover, there is evidence that some rebels have offered compensation to civilians for harm done to them (CCC 2012, 8). Finally, rebels have assisted in the evacuation of civilians to safe areas, and welcomed fleeing civilians in areas under their control.

Yet seen from the point of view of the rebellion, civilian protection is also a complex matter and, probably inevitably, rebel groups have already been called to task for their failure to better ensure civilian security - when they have not been accused of directly compromising it. First, when it comes to civilians supporting (or perceived to be supporting) the government, the Syrian opposition may be a classic case of considering that the fundamental legitimacy of its cause relieves it in part of its humanitarian obligations. The Centre for Civilians in Conflict, for example, has highlighted that 'civilian protection and harm are hard topics to broach with a group of men who firmly believe in the righteousness of their cause, and who maintain a sense of "good guy" exceptionalism (CCC 2012, 4).' In some cases of course, there is no reason to think that rebels are that committed to humanitarian principles in the first place (indeed some have engaged in clear terrorist acts, which were intended to provoke or at least had a very high risk of causing non-combatant injury).

Second, even when it comes to the rebels' 'own' civilians, rebellion organizations may aspire to replace the regime but typically not have or not feel as if they have the resources or even the international legal responsibility

to protect the population generally. The inability to take on the task of protecting civilians is reinforced by the multiplicity of rebel groups, their poor coordination, vague chain of command, and the lack of an agreed upon strategy to mitigate civilian suffering (ibid., 3-5). As a result, it is as if the Syrian National Council, the umbrella resistance organization, hesitated to fully take responsibility for the protection of civilians in a context where it is not the state and does not really have the means to guarantee security. Full protection is projected for the after-Assad era or the transition (for example, the SNC will have 'national responsibility towards the people of Syria' when it comes to holding trials). In fact, the SNC has been quite clear that 'the international community is primarily responsible for making decisions that would protect the Syrian people (SNC 2012).'

Third and perhaps most importantly, there is, in normative terms, a clear tension in the discourse between the need for the revolution to succeed, which is almost invariably put at the apex of priorities, and the more humanitarian goal of protecting civilians. SNC documents briefly mention that the FSA has 'defence responsibilities' that include 'securing necessary protections for civilians (SNC 2012).' Yet protecting civilians is a 'priority' rather than the 'goal' of the revolution. Pointedly, the SNC supports the FSA in its role 'of protecting the peaceful Revolution of our people' rather than the people themselves. The FSA is ultimately more involved in pitched battles against Assad's army and, whilst it is not indifferent to the security of at least some civilians, its foremost goal is the overthrow of the Assad regime. This struggle may substantially endanger civilians either directly to the extent that they are seen as Assad supporters, or indirectly to the extent that combat efforts expose local civilians to collateral or retaliatory violence. Although it is hard to find evidence that the population is occasionally wary of actions supposedly taken for its sake by the FSA, it is only likely that fighting in dense urban environments

will create tensions with even revolution supportive civilians.

### **International Assistance to Protection Efforts**

The international debate on Syria is characteristically dominated by the issue of civilian protection at least on the rhetorical level. The ambiguity of the goal of protecting civilians was already in evidence in Libya where it led some states to interpret Security Council resolutions as effectively authorizing the targeting of a range of Libyan military assets, leading to the fall of the regime. Not surprisingly, there is thus a chronic suspicion in the post-Libya context that civilian protection may be a slippery slope, or even a Trojan horse for 'regime change.' There is of course also an argument that security can only be attained via some sort of 'regime change' when a government has so compromised itself in violence that it can never be expected to be responsible for security. These tensions are at work in the Syrian context.

Some support arming the rebellion as substitute to outside intervention and the qualms about the legality of such an intervention that would inevitably ensue. In this respect, the Syrians' 'right to self-defence' has featured prominently in some international normative discourses, especially in view of the Security Council's limitations in dealing with the crisis. Proposals to "help the Syrians help themselves" are really thinly-veiled discussions of the possibility of supporting the rebellion. For example, when the Saudi foreign minister or Turkey's Erdogan insist on the right of the Syrians to defend themselves against the regime, they do not have civilian protection in mind but more fundamentally the idea of a right to overthrow an unjust dictatorship. Indeed, civilian protection has at times served as a pretext for some states to funnel assistance, including in some cases weapons, to the rebellion itself. It is quite clear that the weapons and much of the support to the rebellion are part of the effort to overthrow the regime rather than for civilian protection as such.

Even some more supposedly humanitarian initiatives reveal a clear ambiguity. Consider, for example, John McCain's argument that the US should lead NATO airstrikes on Syria whose 'ultimate goal ... should be to establish and defend safe havens in Syria, especially in the north, in which opposition forces can organize and plan their political and military activities. ... These safe havens could serve as platforms for the delivery of humanitarian and military assistance -- including weapons and ammunition, body armor and other personal protective equipment, tactical intelligence, secure communications equipment, food and water, and medical supplies (McCain 2012).' Similarly, in defending 'no kill zones,' Anne Marie Slaughter has argued for 'arm(ing) the opposition soldiers with anti-tank, countersniper and portable anti-aircraft weapons,' whilst imposing the 'key condition' that this assistance 'be used defensively – only to stop attacks by the Syrian military (Slaughter 2012).' The notions of safe havens are very problematic in conditions where it seems unrealistic to expect rebels to use their newly delivered weapons only for the humanitarian purposes that donors intend (or pretend to intend). Ultimately, the element of general support of the rebellion often ends up dominating the discourse, as when McCain adds, quite explicitly, that 'These safe havens could also help the Free Syrian Army and other armed groups in Syria to train and organize themselves into more cohesive and effective military forces (McCain 2012).'

A widespread international view in this context is that, notwithstanding the legitimacy of seeking to oust Assad, arming the rebels will only prolong the conflict after his fall and risks fuelling sectarian divides. The Secretary General has appealed to those funding rebels with weapons to stop from doing so. According to Ban Ki-Moon, 'Those who provide arms to either side are only contributing to further misery – and the risk of unintended consequences as the fighting intensifies and spreads (UNSG 2012).' The international approach is thus a priori more

focused on protection of civilians than helping the rebellion topple the regime, although that is constantly susceptible to change, and there are gaps between the official discourse and reality.

Nonetheless, the international community's means of action remain very limited. Traditional means of protection appear to be singularly ill-adapted. The International Committee of the Red Cross's access to war zones is very uneven, and has been denied on a variety of occasions. The threat of international criminal prosecutions is a necessary but clearly insufficient means of pressure on the regime. The international community is left with the ambiguous role of accepting refugees as the most evident way in which it can help protect civilians (in a way that connects with civilians' own flight efforts). There have been calls, notably from Amnesty International, for more to be done in that respect, especially by opening Iraqi and Turkish border crossings. However, the potential refugee is of interest to the international community here only by the time s/he reaches a border crossing. There is little sense that the international community might help the process of escaping.

As already mentioned, there has been talk of humanitarian corridors and safe zones as a way in which global and local protection efforts can be articulated. Turkey has called for the setting up of a buffer zone in Syria. The corridors and zones would ideally require an international mandate and, more importantly, some international show of force. But they would also require efforts by civilians to regroup there and thus arguably build on elements of civilian resilience. They would also require a commitment by the Syrian rebels to respect their humanitarian and safe character. As the experience of Bosnia shows, however, such safe zones, outside from being precarious, require careful cooperation from the local population. Unfortunately, and even though this in no way excuses the atrocities that were committed by Serb forces in overrunning these zones, it has long been suspected that some

were used if not as bases for attacks, at least as resting and replenishing areas for elements of the Bosnian armed forces. The idea has been shelved in the Syrian debate.

In this context, it is in fact often highly unorthodox international strategies that have had some limited success. Those groups that have been the most effective, arguably, are those that have assisted local clandestine hospitals. Doctors Without Borders medics have been known to infiltrate Syria to help with treatment. Clandestine visits of journalists to Syrian rebel forces and strongholds has also allowed some information about the plight of civilians locally to filter out. An Israeli NGO is said to have crossed the border in secret to bring assistance (iL4syrians 2012). These initiatives typically have had a transnational rather than supranational character, one which is arguably reshaping civilian protection strategies, as well as contemporary conflicts more generally.

With time, a number of international state sponsored initiatives have also begun to emerge that seem more expressly directed at helping civilians to self-protect, most notably the effort to provide 'non-lethal assistance' described by one as 'the promise of the hour (Loveluck 2012).' The UK for example announced that it would provide \$5 million in medical equipment, water purification kits and radios. Body armour is also supposed to be provided for those 'carrying out vital work in the crossfire.' The help was described as 'non-lethal practical assistance.' This is meant to help 'protect unarmed opposition groups, human rights activists and civilians from some of the worst of the violence.' The US joined the movement with a \$15 million donation in non-lethal support to unarmed Syrian opposition groups, which included 1,100 sets of communications equipment (satellite-linked computers, telephones, and cameras), as well as training for more than 1,000 activists, students, and independent journalists.

Another related development is the French government provision of funds to five revolutionary councils in rebel-held parts of Syria to help them restore basic public services such

as water supplies, sanitation, health services and even bakeries. The fear is that the collapse of basic services and the infrastructure may leave the country vulnerable to chaos and extremism. Councils have been chosen because they have filled the gap where the Syrian state was no longer effective. These are interesting initiatives because of the way they relate the global and the local, and how good they seem to be at escaping the dilemma of either supporting the rebellion or protecting civilians. Yet it is in the nature of non-lethal assistance that it is ambiguous. Whilst meant not to be lethal, it does include elements that could be used to reinforce a propensity to lethality (body armour and encrypted radio equipment being the clearest examples). It remains difficult for the international community to articulate a civilian protection agency that would directly connect with the local resilience and involve neither forceful intervention nor armed support of the rebellion in pursuit of its political aims.

### Concluding Remarks

The evolving relationship between the rebellion, international involvement and civilians is one fraught with complexity. On its own, civilian resilience leads to some degree of protection, but given the circumstances, it can probably only temporarily stave off the inevitable hardships. The most promising prospects for protection reside in the ability to coordinate civilian initiatives, the rebellion and international intervention. Direct international intervention seems to have very little support among Syrian opposition groups, which have so far sent a loud signal that they think it would detract from both the goals of a free Syria and civilian protection. Any support to the rebellion by the international community, however, may have contradictory effects on civilian protection, either because the rebellion is ultimately unwilling or unable to invest significant resources in such protection, because the surplus of fighting leads to added civilian casualties or because the rebellion is only interested in safeguarding *some* civilians.

Conversely, separating the humanitarian stakes entirely from the outcome of the conflict seems unrealistic, and may only prolong the suffering of civilian populations, in a context where the lasting security of civilians will depend on the political outcomes of the conflict. It remains difficult to outline the contours of a humanitarian strategy that would have as its central pillar reliance on civilian resilience, although the contours of such a strategy are being suggested by civil society organizations in Syria.

It may be that ultimately it is unhelpful to think of support to the rebellion as either/or, when the issue should be under what conditions and at what price the rebellion should be supported. In this context, one of the central problems is defining the normative status of the rebellion vis-à-vis civilians (*all* civilians) in Syria, and the responsibility of the international community in supporting the former in the hope that it will lead to better protection of the latter. As has been seen the FSA sees itself as both the spearhead of the rebellion and, more or less incidentally (and sometimes not at all), as an occasional provider of security to civilian populations. The increasing recognition of the rebellion as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people should be used to frame the rebellion as a government in the making, a sort of 'state within the state,' whose legitimacy and credibility will depend on its ability to behave responsibly. It could help highlight channels of accountability that lead from the rebel to the population and include commitments to abide by both international humanitarian law (vis-à-vis the rebels' enemies and civilian populations associated with them) and international human rights law (vis-à-vis civilians who support them).

This is an avenue that has begun to be explored, most notably by the Center for Civilians in Conflict, which argues that 'military support to the rebel opposition should be tied to civilian protection and accountability mechanisms' and that 'any actor considering supplying Syria's armed rebel factions with weapons has a singular responsibility to

assess the end-user's battlefield tactics and understanding of basic civilian protection principles, and their impact on civilian populations (CCC 2012, 1).' Indeed, in the same way one would expect states who support the Assad regime, including militarily, to be held to accountable morally, politically and even legally of the regime's actions, it is only normal that states who support the opposition should be accountable for some of the consequences of that support.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> There are civilians who are almost by definition to a degree insulated from politics, children being the foremost example.
- <sup>2</sup> See, e.g., the case of Emad Khareeta, a civilian living in Zabadani, who claims to a journalist that he is staying out of solidarity with the rebels. 'Either we leave victorious or we leave to the graveyard (Kouddous 2012).'

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