# Symposium ‘protection of civilians in Syria’ – December 4, 2013

In 2013, the annual SVW symposium (co-organised by the Dutch Foundation for Peace Sciences, IKV Pax Christi and VU University) focused on the protection of civilians in Syria and the dilemma of (non)-intervention in complex conflicts.

After the welcoming remarks by Prof. Jaap de Wilde, who chaired the symposium (as chairperson of the Board of the Foundation for Peace Sciences, SVW), **Prof. Marlies Glasius** started the debate by arguing that the question whether we should intervene falsely implies that the international community is not yet involved in Syria. There have been constant interactions between the West (Europe) and the Levant (Syria) since thousands of years, and especially in the last hundred years the West has had tremendous cultural and political influences on Syria. The question should therefore not be whether we should intervene, but what we can do to help Syrians who are trying to live through the conflict. According to Prof. Glasius, citizens have four protection strategies during (civil) war. These are avoidance, compliance, collective action, and taking up arms. She gave examples of all four strategies in the Syrian context, and ended her presentation with four specific recommendations on how to intervene, especially for Western civil society organisations:

1) help Syrian refugees, even if that means ‘just’ dealing with the symptoms of war, not its causes;

2) don’t judge compliance, either with the regime or with the rebels, as somehow morally wrong, but instead start thinking about and preparing transitional justice mechanisms to prevent revenge once the war is over;
3) support bottom-up institution building in rebel controlled areas, both morally and organisationally, not even necessarily with financial means; and

4) prepare for post-conflict disarmament, to prevent a scenario such as in Libya.

The next speaker, **dr. Andrea Ruggeri**, discussed international intervention in the form of UN peacekeeping missions. Protection of civilians can be enhanced through UN missions, but it must be done properly. His central argument was that it is possible to apply lessons from previous missions to the case of Syria. Supported by statistics (derived from missions in Africa since 1989), he showed that weak mandates, small contingents and shorts missions can potentially even exacerbate conflicts:

- On average, with no *military troops* deployed to a conflict, the expected number of civilians killed in a given month is approximately 106. When the number of UN military troops increases to 8,000, the expected value of civilian deaths declines is approximately to 2.

- With no UN *police* on the ground, the expected value of civilian deaths in a given month is 96. Some 200 police reduce the expected number of civilians killed dramatically, to fewer than 14, and the presence of 500 police almost eliminates civilian death.

- *Military observers* are not adequate for civilian protection, as they are associated with an increased level of civilian casualties. *(Hultman et al. 2013: 885-886)*

Although the scientific literature is not (yet) very specific on why this is, part of the explanation for this escalating tension of short and weak missions is that actors in the conflict derive a sense of power from their ability to continue killing people in front of UN observers.

Dr. Ruggeri showed that the UN mission to Syria only lasted for five months (April - August 2012), and consisted of only 297 military observers. During this time, the number of casualties rose dramatically.

Journalist **Maarten Zeegers** chose to share a story about a personal friend who lives in one of the suburbs of Damascus that has become a main battleground for the fight between the armed opposition and the government. The situation is one of a standoff, where no-one can get in or out. Officially his town is liberated by the Free Syrian Army, but it is regularly shelled and bombed from the air. Mr. Zeegers is very pessimistic about a political solution in the near future, and does not believe that the international community will intervene in any meaningful way. His friend is even more sceptical and does not like the idea of Western imperialist troops intervening at all.

**Jan Jaap van Oosterzee** of the Dutch peace organisation IKV Pax Christi is equally pessimistic. While until recently he believed it was worth discussing the option of a limited international intervention in the form of a no-fly zone, he thinks it is too late to have a meaningful intervention aimed at the protection of civilians. Even the Western countries at the UN use a completely different discourse on Syria than for example on Libya. The wording *responsibility to protect* is not used at all. On the other hand, there is international intervention in Syria in other forms. Iran and the Gulf countries support respectively the regime and the (islamist) opposition, and other countries also send money and arms. These interventions are primarily driven by self-interest. One of the main problems, van Oosterzee argued, is that the fiercest battles are now between the secular and the radical islamist opposition forces. Non-violent activists in the so-called ‘liberated areas’ fear for islamisation and repression by Jihadist armed groups. So even if an international intervention is put on the table again, of which he is sure it will happen again in a few months time, this will probably not be with a view to protect the Syrian population. The best civil society can hope for under these circumstances is to maintain ‘islands of peace and civilisation’ in the turbulent civil war.

After the coffee break, the floor was opened for discussion.

The first questions drew attention to even more problems in Syria, from the use of rape as a weapon of war to the safety of civilians in refugee camps. The speaker noted that while the world will not allow an Islamic state in Syria, it is allowing a genocidal state to exist. To this the panelists, especially Mr. van Oosterzee and Prof. Glasius, could only repeat their plea for taking the *responsibility to protect* seriously, and to provide humanitarian aid in the refugee camps, since this might be a terrain where global civil society can actually achieve something.

A question that sparked much debate was about the notion of ‘protection of civilians’. In Syria there are no clear-cut boundaries between civilians and combatants, so who should the international community protect and support? To this the panel replied that taking up arms is a protection strategy for citizens. It seems impossible for youngsters not to choose sides in the conflict once they turn 18, due to conscription to military service. Moreover, the Syrian government uses the grey area between ‘civilians’ and ‘combatants’ to argue that everyone is a legitimate target. Another member of the audience argued for the importance of international criminal and humanitarian law, and for maintaining the distinction between combatants and non-combatants: these offer standards for judging the situation in Syria. And under the Geneva conventions combatants too have certain rights.

Another question that sparked debate concerned allegations of Western neo-imperialism in trying to intervene in every conflict. This is a complaint that is sometimes heard in conflict areas, and Maarten Zeegers confirmed that both the Syrian regime and the rebels distrust the UN and the West. Instead, the rebels just want weapons to fight their own war. Likewise, citizens want ‘someone’ to come and protect them, but they don’t suggest any specific actors. Dr. Ruggeri countered the idea of Western neo-imperialism by pointing out that the majority of UN peacekeepers come from countries such as Nigeria, Pakistan and India, and that China is a top-ten financial contributor to peacekeeping missions. More problematic in his view is that it is not very likely that the UN will intervene in any way, and that UN peacekeepers are good at keeping the peace, but very bad at fighting wars.

The debate ended with the question whether there are still any non-violent activists in Syria. They are hard to reach and some are now fleeing the country because of pressure from radical Islamic groups, but others are organising humanitarian work and non-violent resistance. The example of the village Kafranbel was mentioned, where citizens have been writing banners with slogans to the international community. Supporting small scale initiatives as well as the refugees from the conflict (also by inviting them to come to the Netherlands) is the best the West can hope to achieve, according to the speakers. Even if on rational grounds we have no choice but to be pessimistic, we should continue supporting those Syrians who are working to create a better future.

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