

History Repeats Itself: A “Humanitarian Intervention” in Syria - 150 Years Ago

By [Voltaire Network](#)

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A humanitarian intervention in Syria? Humanitarian grounds had already been used in 1860 ... precisely by France as a pretext to intervene militarily in Syria, then an Ottoman province. In this article, Geneva University scholar Pascal Herren lays bare the true intentions of France under Napoleon III, which were every bit as disreputable as those pursued under Sarkozy or Hollande. He also brings to light the dire consequences that befell the peoples of the region.



On 16 August 1860, a French expeditionary force landed in Beirut. According to Napoleon III, the French military were going to “restore order” in Syria, then an Ottoman province. Regarded today as the first example of “the right to intervene on humanitarian grounds”, the military intervention actually served to increase France’s economic stranglehold in the region.

A humanitarian intervention in Syria is recurrently demanded; it should put an end to the suffering which the population has been exposed to since 2011 due to the struggles between the regime and the armed opposition. The main responsibility for these fights is attributed – rightly or wrongly – to the government.

So, this relief effort would involve overthrowing the current regime. It is suspected to have indirectly started several months ago, when the insurgents were armed and also agents and foreign troops were deployed into the area. However, the use of force on the territory of a foreign country without the consent of the competent authorities contradicts the principle of state sovereignty enshrined in the UN Charter. Use of force between states is prohibited with the exception of the case of legitimate defense or a joint action decided by the Security Council.

The International Court of Justice has condemned the military support, which the Reagan administration gave to the insurgent Nicaraguan Contras, struggling to overthrow the Sandinista government in 1986. The Court of Justice had even specified that such support was not suitable to secure the respect for human rights, even though Washington accused the regime of having committed atrocities.

These legal obstacles have not prevented a unilateral practice from developing, officially reasoned with altruistic motives, as for example the bombing of former Yugoslavia during the Kosovo crisis in 1999, or the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The most recent example in this series represents the action in Libya in 2011, where some States have admitted that it went far beyond the means the Security Council’s resolution of 1973 had admitted.



On 17 November 2012, French President François Hollande received at the Elysée Palace the president of the “National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces,” concocted in Doha less than a week before. Despite its extendable name, this new brainchild of the West and the Gulf monarchies is incapable of unifying the opposition, but its existence has been used to justify the release of 1.2 million euros in the name of “emergency humanitarian aid.” And military career men are part and parcel of the panorama.

A norm of higher, universal type is cited as justification for these unilateral interventions: the obligation to protect the life of any population against oppressive massive threats. But this principle, perfectly legitimate in itself, depends exclusively on the goodwill of the intervening. How can you make sure that somebody uses this arrogated, immense power and uses violence against another State to pursue other reprehensible targets? The history is full of “just” wars, which turned out very badly for the affected populations. The great jurist from Neuchâtel, Emer de Vattel, had already condemned the subjugation of the Indians of America by the conquistadores in 1758. This subjugation was also done under the pretext of freeing them from tyrants.

The experts in this question were always looking out for a precedent, showing that an intervening power led such an action in an irreproachable style. For long they believed to have found it in the expedition carried out in 1860, which concerned the Ottoman province of Syria, also including the area of today’s Lebanon. From May to August 1860 between 17,000 and 23,000 people, most of them of Christian faith, were massacred in the mountains of Lebanon and Damascus in battles that took place between different tribal communities. When this message arrived in Europe it raised a public shock. The Ottoman authorities were accused of having encouraged the abuse of power by the Druze militias in the Lebanon Mountains and by the insurgents in Damascus; they were even accused of having lent a hand.

Napoleon III decided to send an expedition corps of 6,000 men on site to put an end to the “carnage”, and with the approval of the other European powers. The French troops stayed in the area for less than a year. After peace had returned and they had reorganized the authorities which resulted in maintaining civil peace up to the First World War, they withdrew. Still today some lawyers who are totally opposed to the right to humanitarian intervention, concede that this action in 1860 has perhaps been the only “real” humanitarian intervention of the 19th century.

Looking closer, however, the disputes that erupted between the various communities in 1860 had also been fomented by the “clientelism” practiced by the European powers towards the local minorities at that time. It should be noted here that huge interests were at stake. They concerned the distribution of the disintegrating Ottoman Empire, which was bitterly disputed among the major powers of Europe. Syria is located at the strategically important road to India, the jewel of the British Kingdom. France did not hide its interest in this area that promises many opportunities for trade. Russia had already sought to extend its territory to the South for long. To reach their aims, everyone based on a local community, which he exploited: the French were protectors of the Catholics; the Russians defended the Orthodox, the British acted as a sponsor of the Druze.

During the period following the intervention of 1860, France extended its economic

influence on Lebanon so much that 50% of the active Lebanese population were working in the French silk production in 1914. This whole sector of the economy perished when the French industry decided to give up the Lebanese suppliers. As a result they lost their basis of life.

A year later, in 1915, the British and French allies organized the blockade of the Syrian coasts by preventing food deliveries for this region into the country, which was highly dependent on grain imports, the aim was to encourage the Arab provinces to rise against the Central Government in Istanbul, which was an ally of Germany's Wilhelm II in the First World War. The result was an unprecedented famine: 200,000 deaths in the Centre and in the North of the Lebanon Mountains and 300,000 in the rest of Syria.

As early as in 1840, François Guizot, former ambassador of France in London, had summed up the geopolitical considerations prevailing in the European courts, which in his eyes followed the policy of the British foreign minister Lord Palmerston, as follows:

"There, in the depth of any valley, on top of any mountain in the Lebanon Mountains, there are husbands, women, children, who love each other, who enjoy life and who will be massacred tomorrow, because Lord Palmerston, while travelling on the train from London to Southampton, will have said to himself: 'Syria must rise, I need an uprising in Syria, if Syria does not rise, I am a fool.'"

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