

# A Formula For International Response To Mass Violence

By Adam Levin

Submitted for the Workable World Trust Essay Contest

## 1. My Background and Activities

My name is Adam Levin, a 23-year-old St. Louis resident. At the moment, I work for the United Way as a Campaign Representative, working to improve UW's annual fund-raising campaign. In addition, I will soon begin work for a local political communications firm. I write articles for *Occasional Planet*, a St. Louis-based left-leaning online publication. I'm also a writer of fiction and an accomplished trombonist.

I have lived in St. Louis for most of my life. I grew up in a Jewish, politically conscious family, which gave me a window into international relations. I became interested in several subjects: politics, music, literature and other entertainment. Learning orchestral, jazz, and rock styles on my trombone, I was able to obtain a music scholarship to the College of Wooster, in the titular town in northern Ohio.

In college I studied international relations and had intended to minor in music. However, disputes with the music department caused me to switch my minor to Africana Studies. During this time, my worldview was refined and, in my opinion, improved. I came to respect nuance and specificity in political discussions.

After college, I have lived in St. Louis, participating in various social-justice related fields. In particular, I serve as a Board Member of the United Nations Association of St. Louis, which gives me an opportunity to see how people with internationalist leanings like myself operate and try to improve the world.

All these experiences have turned me into a thoughtful, aware person with a passion for international affairs. I hope to put my past learning to good use at the conference in Minneapolis in October.

## **II. A Formula For Intervention**

As I write this, the death toll of the Syrian Civil War is well above 200,000. The Assad regime and its largely Islamist antagonists have both committed atrocities against the civilian population, though more of the blame probably lies with Assad. The question of intervention inevitably arises. What are we, as citizens of the world's most powerful country, to make of all of this? By what standard should an outside force stop “minding its own business” and attempt to put a stop to mass violence against innocent people? It is a frightfully difficult question, especially because intervention is, as I note below, sometimes worse for the civilian populace than nonintervention. However, in this essay, I attempt to sketch an abstract process for determining the feasibility and desirability for humanitarian intervention.

There are many different types of what one might call “humanitarian intervention”. For this essay, I will define humanitarian intervention as *military involvement by forces outside of a state with the official goal of saving the state's civilian populace from mass violence*. As one might expect, the “outside forces” are usually states. States are the most powerful actors in the international community, and as Kenneth Waltz might point out, there is no central authority on this planet. This anarchic status means that those who intervene for ostensibly humanitarian purposes will usually be state actors, though exceptions might include the United Nations peacekeeping forces and private military corporations.

In this essay, I propose a test on whether outside forces should intervene militarily in situations of immense loss of human life and egregious human rights violations. I have developed an (admittedly and intentionally high-concept) expression for determining the feasibility and morality of humanitarian intervention. Allow me first to lay out the process I decided upon, then to prove its relevance:

**1. CAN the international community intervene?**

- **Does the military capacity exist to protect the endangered civilians and potentially defeat the forces belligerent to the civilians?**
- **Does the political will exist to attempt intervention?**

**2. SHOULD the international community intervene?**

- ✎ **Does the composition of intervening forces upset the civilian population?**
- ✦ **Will the intervention produce conditions for civilians worse than those caused by refraining from intervention, in the short run AND the long run?**

**If the answers to 1. are all YES, and the answers to 2. are all NO, then an intervention is theoretically viable.**

## **Feasibility**

The first question I bring up of the two-part test is, “CAN the international community intervene?” The first sub-question I posed, regarding the military capability to obtain the objectives of a military intervention, is rather easy to answer: Yes, the capacity usually exists to defeat the violators. In the modern era, in which the powerful nations can deploy their militaries anywhere on the globe, the idea that the power to defeat mass human rights violations does not exist is ludicrous. A far more complicated question is my second sub-question, regarding the political will to intervene. Here is where things get murkier: The “why” of the question of intervention must be addressed.

The common objection to humanitarian intervention is that of “imperialism”. This critique usually comes in two forms: The socioeconomic objection and the postmodern objection. The socioeconomic critic objects to who benefits from the intervention, and is concerned with the situation for people on the ground: For instance, the charge leveled at the United States that its post-2001 War on Terror has been motivated by the pursuit of oil. One might note that Dick Cheney gained enormously from his association with Halliburton and the American invasion in Iraq. *Should this matter?* Yes and no. I would say that the interior politics that produce intervention are less important than the welfare of the people being “saved” by the intervention. Still, corporatism does seem to produce more illegitimate interventions than legitimate ones: Surely the massive body count of the Iraq war testifies to this. Corporatism is its own sin, but not the focus of this essay. For my purposes, the socioeconomic critique is important in identifying erroneous ways of intervention. It serves as an indicator for disastrous intervention, but this indicator is not *alone* a reason for nonintervention in the case of mass violence.

The second objection is the postmodern critique. This would hold that the stronger country commits a form of spiritual imperialism when intervening. Edward Said might suggest that illegitimate intervention, designed to plunder resources and territory for the corporate state, is frequently masked by faux-humanitarian concerns. Our culture is frequently designed to misconceive the Other, says Said, and one of the most heinous misconceptions is that foreigners have no agency and are to be saved by more “civilized folk”. But this cultural critique is not enough, in my opinion, to deter an intervention. For example, I once heard a friend joke that the 2012 French intervention in Mali was “the colonial power restoring order”, pejoratively. In actuality, France was supported by the Malinese, who were battling an Islamist group who had murdered their way across the country and destroyed priceless "un-Islamic" art. We don't yet know the long-term outcome of that conflict, but France's intervention was a short-term success. Should France have stopped fighting the Islamists because it was “problematic” for Frenchmen to fight Africans? Should the Vietnamese have aborted their mission to overthrow Pol Pot

to “mind their own business”? Certainly not. I do believe in the value of the postmodern critique. It is always healthy for a culture to check its cognitive biases and to make sure foreigners are not viewed as mysterious and “Other”-like. That kind of thinking can indeed justify disastrous intervention. But pithy literary critique is simply not enough to argue against protecting innocents.

## **Desirability**

As I noted above, there are issues with the feasibility of intervention. Let us assume, however, that there are not, and the proposed intervention passes the first half of my test: A population faces the threat of mass murder or outright genocide, and foreigners stand ready to invade, disperse the perpetrators, and rescue the victims. We must ask if this is *desirable*. A large part of the answer to that question lies in the composition of the foreign forces intervening. Here is where the postmodern critique may be useful: If the local populace views their “saviors” as merely interested in conquest, intervention will not be successful. Note how quickly, for instance, the United States lost its goodwill in Iraq. The famous images of Iraqis tearing down Saddam Hussein's likenesses gave way to brutal insurgency against the “crusading” Americans. Iraq was a failure of a humanitarian intervention, and in no small part because the people intervening seemed more like foreign plunderers than “liberators”, as a Bush administration phrase held. Perhaps the United Nations realizes this: It would certainly explain why [UN Peacekeeping](#) is funded by wealthy countries but frequently staffed by soldiers from poorer states and regions. Thus UN peacekeeping frequently appears genuine, as opposed to imperialist.

Now we come to the most important question of all: Does the intervention benefit the populace of the intervened state or region? Only a prescient could answer this question perfectly, of course, but an intervening power should examine it before intervention occurs. In the case of Iraq, there is good evidence that the intervention was made in bad faith (i.e. the lack of nuclear weapons in Iraq, and the

apparent desire for corporate plunder rather than stopping the tyrannical Hussein). However, even if the United States invaded Iraq for the more honest and pure motivations, the intervention would still be a failure. The death toll sees to that. Though Iraqis deal with different challenges today than under the Hussein regime, it is difficult to say that Iraqis are better off now. And in my proposed metric, an “unsure” answer does not constitute a “yes”. In other words, if there is a reasonable doubt that the intervention will produce horrific results, it is simply not worth it.

## **Conclusion**

My purpose with this essay was not to create a perfect model for intervention, but rather to create some general guidelines. I mentioned the Syrian Civil War above. I don't necessarily advocate for intervention in Syria. I do, however, believe that the international community should be doing more than [monitoring the situation](#). Secretary-General of the UN Ban Ki-Moon bluntly called the tepid international response to Syria [a failure](#). Whether the answer is inherent in the nature of sovereignty or the international state system, I do not claim to know. But we need to be having a discussion about the responsibility to protect our fellow human beings, and what role, if any, military force should play in this responsibility. I hope my metric can at least contribute to this debate.