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**HUMANITARIAN  
INTERVENTION**

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**DEBATING MATTERS**  
**TOPIC**  
**GUIDES**

[www.debatingmatters.com](http://www.debatingmatters.com)

**MOTION:**

**“WESTERN  
HUMANITARIAN  
INTERVENTION IS  
A VALID TOOL OF  
FOREIGN POLICY”**

## ABOUT DEBATING MATTERS

Debating Matters because ideas matter. This is the premise of the Institute of Ideas Debating Matters Competition for sixth form students which emphasises substance, not just style, and the importance of taking ideas seriously. Debating Matters presents schools with an innovative and engaging approach to debating, where the real-world debates and a challenging format, including panel judges who engage with the students, appeal to students from a wide range of backgrounds, including schools with a long tradition of debating and those with none.

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## KEY TERMS

[Cold War](#)

[Convention](#)

[Diplomacy](#)

[Geopolitical](#)

[Humanitarian Intervention](#)

[Imperialism](#)

[International Sanctions](#)

[Liberal Internationalism](#)

[Mission Creep](#)

[Proxy War](#)

[Realpolitik](#)

[Responsibility to Protect \(R2P\)](#)

[Sovereign State](#)

# INTRODUCTION

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# NOTES

**1** The concept of ‘humanitarian intervention’ was conceived towards the end of the twentieth century, after the end of the Cold War [Ref: [Foreign Affairs](#)]. The term is broadly defined as the use of military force by a state or group of states with the aim of ending human-rights violations perpetrated by another state against its own citizens. Others use the term more broadly to mean both non-military, non-forcible methods to provide emergency aid, and to refer to international economic and diplomatic sanctions against another sovereign state to encourage change. There is no legal, standard definition of ‘humanitarian intervention’ and so the terms are often used interchangeably. In recent conflicts such as Libya in 2011 [Ref: [BBC News](#)] and Syria currently, and as far back as the USA’s United Nations-backed aid mission to Somalia in 1992 [Ref: [BBC](#)], the term has broadly been understood as meaning military intervention by one state, or multilaterally by a number of states, to “use violence in order to control violence” [Ref: [Foreign Affairs](#)]. The contemporary debate about humanitarian intervention rarely takes the form of questioning the validity of one or more nation states challenging the sovereignty of another but instead on the legality, consensus, moral duty or foreign-policy aims of such interventions. With military action against ISIS in Iraq [Ref: [Russia Today](#)] currently in the news, the debate about humanitarian intervention, and its rights and wrongs, has come to the fore. What are the overriding moral principles at stake for intervention against other sovereign states? Does the West have a moral duty to intervene, as well as a ‘responsibility to protect’; to eradicate genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity by intervening abroad [Ref: [United Nations](#)]? Are non-military forms of intervention, such as international sanctions any different? Or does such intervention simply prolong human suffering, inflame civil wars, and make a bad situation worse [Ref: [Independent](#)]?



# THE HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION DEBATE IN CONTEXT

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## R2P: The Good War?

In 2005, at the United Nations World Summit, the General Assembly passed a resolution stating: “The duty to prevent and halt genocide and mass atrocities lies first and foremost with the State, but the international community has a role that cannot be blocked by the invocation of sovereignty. Sovereignty no longer exclusively protects States from foreign interference; it is a charge of responsibility where States are accountable for the welfare of their people.” This statement was enshrined as article 1 of the UN’s Genocide Convention and has come to be known as the concept of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) [Ref: [United Nations](#)]. The importance of this new convention [Ref: [Oxford Dictionaries](#)] was that for the first time in modern history, military intervention by one sovereign state [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)], or states, against another, could be justified not as an act of national defence or self-interest, or of aggression, but of the justified right of the international community, or of another individual state, to protect a nation’s citizens from its own government. The R2P doctrine challenged the modern understanding of a state’s right to self-determination and sovereignty in conflicts defined as breaking this new convention [Ref: [spiked](#)], with those advocating the R2P principle arguing it would be: “...an abdication of...responsibility” not to intervene to save lives and prevent human rights abuses [Ref: [The Times](#)], such as the recent kidnapping of 200 schoolgirls by a militant group in Nigeria [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. This view is echoed by those who believe that we should: “Leave aside any moral argument and just think of our interests” regarding regional and international stability [Ref: [The Times](#)]. This approach however, concerns critics, who suggest that humanitarian intervention can be used as a convenient cover for vested political interests and of war by proxy [Ref: [Huffington Post](#)]. And more broadly, at a time when the West’s role as ‘world

policemen’ is increasingly questioned [Ref: [Economist](#)], many feel that military intervention and: “The ‘responsibility to protect’ doctrine is a symbol of the West’s inability to define its post-Cold War role” [Ref: [spiked](#)]. In addition, others are more scathing in their criticism, accusing today’s humanitarian intervention of being: “...the latest brand name for imperialism as it begins a return to respectability” [Ref: [New Statesman](#)]. And in an age of foreign policy based on idealism [Ref: [Forbes](#)] rather than practical realpolitik [Ref: [Oxford](#)] some fear the removal of traditional sensitivities about military action risks destabilising the world further, with Russia and China arguing, in opposition to Western nations and in relation to the current conflict in Syria, that we: “...need to strictly adhere to the norms of international law ... and not to allow their violation” [Ref: [Reuters](#)].

## So what to do?

Those who challenge the notion of the Good War, of: “...a battle between good and evil; between civilisation and barbarity; between democracy and dictatorship” as then Prime Minister Tony Blair described NATO’s intervention in Yugoslavia in 1999 [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)], argue that recent history has shown Western interventions are often messy affairs, with no clear or positive outcome. The “myth of liberal intervention”, critics say, exacerbates conflicts and makes things worse [Ref: [Guardian](#)], and they caution that military intervention in conflicts such as the civil war in Syria, would only further destabilise the region [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Similarly, there is also the suggestion that military means are no substitute for tried and tested diplomacy which would negotiate a settlement for both sides rather than a win for one faction or another: “The disconcerting thing about foreign affairs is that the unflashy road may actually be the successful one. Diplomacy grinds slow, and the United Nations grinds even slower. But the process



## THE HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION DEBATE IN CONTEXT CONTINUED...

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looks to be working” [Ref: [Scotsman](#)]. Another issue of contention is the question of whether intervention can ever be truly neutral and for purely humanitarian reasons or if, as some claim: “...what started out as a civil uprising against years of repression, poverty and government corruption (is) turned into a regional proxy war” enflamed and prolonged by outside intervention [Ref: [Salon](#)]. Supporters of intervention point out that in a globalised world: “...all tyranny is local” [Ref: [Huffington Post](#)] and in certain circumstances the power of the Western nations needs to be harnessed because: “...when the killing can be curbed only by the kind of force the West can bring to bear, the world will look to the United States... We need a president brave enough to explain to Americans why it is profoundly in their own interest, as well as humanity’s, to act in such dire settings” [Ref: [Foreign Policy](#)]. This assessment of Western intervention is rejected altogether on principle by critics such as vice-president of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) Bruce Kent, who argues that there can be no solution to conflict by military means: “The time has run out for traditional military answers...Cultures change and it ought to be our business to make ours one of peace, not war” [Ref: [openDemocracy](#)].

### Damned if they do, damned if they don’t?

When reflecting on two decades of Western intervention in conflicts in Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Africa, many now question the morality of Western military forces intervening abroad, noting that: “It is hard to exaggerate the misery and chaos created by so-called ‘liberal interventionism’” [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. During the intervention in Libya some wondered if ‘mission creep’ had set in with: “...a shift in emphasis by the western allies from a humanitarian mission towards a strategy for regime change” [Ref: [Financial Times](#)]. Similarly, commentator Owen Jones notes whilst assessing the situation in Libya three years

after the fall of the regime, that: “One of the great perversities of the so-called war on terror is that fundamentalist Islamist forces have flourished as a direct consequence of it”, highlighting the unintended consequences of Western military intervention [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. When the UK parliament voted in August last year against British military involvement in Syria [Ref: [BBC News](#)], many argued that the perceived legacy of Western failure in Iraq and Afghanistan loomed large over British parliamentarians [Ref: [Washington Post](#)]. Yet those interventions were in turn influenced by earlier post-Cold War conflicts in Kosovo and Rwanda, where some argue that a failure to intervene in time, caused the ensuing barbarism in which millions were killed. Decisive Western intervention could, it is argued, have prevented such bloodshed [Ref: [Foreign Policy](#)]. But others are skeptical, and suggest that humanitarian intervention is inconsistent and hypocritical, as evidenced by current attitudes to other autocratic and oppressive states where there is: “No denunciation, no demonization, no sanctions, no attack” [Ref: [Counterpunch](#)]. Tory MP and former diplomat Rory Stewart, suggests that ultimately, the solution to conflicts abroad cannot be solved by outsiders, but rather by the citizens of the nations concerned: “In the end, the basic problem is very, very simple. Why don’t these interventions work? Because we are foreigners. If things are going wrong in a country, it’s not usually that we don’t have enough foreigners. It’s usually that we have too many” [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. So what are the rights and wrongs of Western humanitarian intervention? Is military intervention on humanitarian grounds a valid tool of good foreign policy? Is there such a thing as a good war, fought for moral reasons? Can military action by one state against another in the name of a responsibility to protect ever be justified? Or is “the West damned if it does and damned if it doesn’t” [Ref: [Independent](#)]?



## ESSENTIAL READING

Humanitarian Intervention Comes of Age

Jon Western & Joshua S Goldstein *Foreign Affairs* 1 December 2011

Kosovo and the myth of liberal intervention

Neil Clark *Guardian* 15 December 2010

## FOR

If We Can Let Syria Burn, Have We Learned Anything at All from Rwanda?

James Traub *Foreign Policy* 4 April 2014

We Need to Intervene in Ukraine

James Snell *Huffington Post* 3 March 2014

This evil should shame us into halting Assad

Roger Boyes *The Times* 22 January 2014

The hand-wringing has to stop. We must act

Tony Blair *The Times* 27 August 2013

## AGAINST

Libya is a disaster we helped create. The west must take responsibility

Owen Jones *Guardian* 24 March 2014

Why we shouldn't intervene in Syria

John McTernan *Scotsman* 11 September 2013

In Syria, foreign intervention will only shed more blood

Seumas Milne *Guardian* 5 June 2012

Western intervention in Syria would make matters worse

Patrick Cockburn *Independent* 27 April 2011

## IN DEPTH

Responsibility to Protect

Office of the Special Adviser on the Prevention of genocide

United Nations

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## BACKGROUNDERS

Only military action will beat the Jihadis

David Aaronovitch *The Times* 14 August 2014

Boko Haram- a suitable case for UN-approved intervention

Richard Norton-Taylor & Ewen Macaskill *Guardian* 8 May 2014

The decline of deterrence

*Economist* 3 May 2014

Afghanistan is a bloody failure – and it is ordinary Syrians who are paying the price

jasmin Alibhai Brown *Independent* 6 April 2014

Our view on foreign intervention is in chaos. We need a solution

*Observer* 30 March 2014

When is war justified?

George White *The Times* 27 March 2014

Look upon the Arab spring and despair

Hugo Rifkind *The Times* 25 March 2014

The Americans are pulling back

Gideon Rachman *Financial Times* 20 January 2014

Rory Stewart: The secret of modern Britain is there is no power anywhere

Decca Aitkenhead *Guardian* 3 January 2014

The bloody disaster of Libya, Iraq and Afghanistan is laid bare

Simon Jenkins *Guardian* 18 November 2013

R2P: how the West failed to justify intervention

Tara McCormack *spiked* 19 September 2013

Diplomacy, not war on Syria is a victory for the American public

Amy Goodman *Guardian* 19 September 2013

6 major players who turned Syria into a proxy war nightmare

Alex Kane *Salon* 6 September 2013

The moral case for military strikes in Syria

Jeff McMahan *Aljazeera* 4 September 2013

Don't blame Cameron for the Syria vote. Blame the ghosts of Iraq.

Max Fisher *Washington Post* 29 August 2013

Syria: the case for and against intervention

Mike Gapes & John Baron *New Statesman* 28 August 2013

Syria: the moral case for military intervention is now overwhelming

Toby Young *Telegraph* 26 August 2013

A Humanitarian 'Proxy War' in Syria?

Jonathan Gilmore *Huffington Post* 29 May 2013

Syria is not Iraq. And it is not always wrong to intervene

Jonathan Freedland *Guardian* 10 February 2012

Why We Shouldn't Attack Syria (Yet)

Robert A Pape *New York Times* 2 February 2012

Libya and the Hypocrisy of Humanitarian Intervention

John V Walhs *Counterpunch* 21 March 2011

We must stand ready to intervene in Libya

Sir Richard Dalton *Telegraph* 27 February 2011

From a culture of war to a culture of peace

Bruce Kent *openDemocracy* 15 March 2010

"Humanitarian intervention" is the latest brand name for imperialism

John Pilger *New Statesman* 8 June 1999

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## BACKGROUNDEERS CONTINUED...

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Westphalian sovereignty

*Wikipedia*

Nato bombing of Yugoslavia

*Wikipedia*

Just War Theory

*BBC Ethics*

On This Day: 1992: American marines land in Somalia

*BBC*

Article 28: Right to social and international order permitting these freedoms to be realised

*BBC World Service*

The vote that tied Britain's hands

*Alastair Burt Chatham House*

## ORGANISATIONS

African Union

NATO

Stop the War

United Nations





## IN THE NEWS

Parliament votes overwhelmingly to support military strikes against ISIS in Iraq

*Russia Today* 26 September 2014

Libya unrest: Many fear 'worst is yet to come'

*BBC News* 20 May 2014

Uganda Calls for Urgent Deployment of Troops in South Sudan

*Wall Street Journal* 20 May 2014

US military should rescue schoolgirls, even without Nigeria's permission – McCain

*Russia Today* 13 May 2014

Afghanistan: British troops leave Helmand outpost

*BBC News* 10 May 2014

Ukraine crisis: G7 leaders pile pressure on Putin with new sanctions on Russia

*Independent* 26 April 2014

UN: 3.5 million Syrians desperately need aid

*Telegraph* 24 April 2014

Syria's starving civilians struggle to survive in bombarded cities

*Guardian* 19 April 2014

Arab Uprisings: 3 Years On

*BBC News* 20 December 2013

Syria crisis: Cameron loses Commons vote on Syria action

*BBC News* 30 August 2013

France confirms Mali military intervention

*BBC News* 11 January 2013

Russia warns West over Syria after Obama threats

*Reuters* 21 August 2012

Last US troops withdraw from Iraq

*BBC News* 18 December 2011

Libya: Nato steps up air strikes on Tripoli

*BBC News* 24 May 2011

Blair's 'international community' doctrine

*BBC News* 6 March 2004

It's time for war, Bush and Blair tell Taliban

*Guardian* 7 October 2001

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## ADVICE FOR DEBATING MATTERS



### FOR STUDENTS

#### READ EVERYTHING .....

In the Topic Guide and in the news - not just your side of the argument either.

#### STATISTICS ARE GOOD BUT.....

Your opponents will have their own too. They'll support your points but they aren't a substitute for them.

#### BE BOLD

Get straight to the point but don't rush into things: make sure you aren't falling back on earlier assertions because interpreting a debate too narrowly might show a lack of understanding or confidence.

#### DON'T BACK DOWN

Try to take your case to its logical conclusion before trying to seem 'balanced' - your ability to challenge fundamental principles will be rewarded - even if you personally disagree with your arguments.

#### DON'T PANIC

Never assume you've lost because every question is an opportunity to explain what you know. Don't try to answer every question but don't avoid the tough ones either.

### FOR TEACHERS

Hoping to start a debating club? Looking for ways to give your debaters more experience? Debating Matters have a wide range of resources to help develop a culture of debate in your school and many more Topic Guides like this one to bring out the best in your students. For these and details of how to enter a team for the Debating Matters Competition visit our website, [www.debatingmatters.com](http://www.debatingmatters.com)

### FOR JUDGES

Judges are asked to consider whether students have been brave enough to address the difficult questions asked of them. Clever semantics might demonstrate an acrobatic mind but are also likely to hinder a serious discussion by changing the terms and parameters of the debate itself.

Whilst a team might demonstrate considerable knowledge and familiarity with the topic, evading difficult issues and failing to address the main substance of the debate misses the point of the competition. Judges are therefore encouraged to consider how far students have gone in defending their side of the motion, to what extent students have taken up the more challenging parts of the debate and how far the teams were able to respond to and challenge their opponents.

As one judge remarked *'These are not debates won simply by the rather technical rules of schools competitive debating. The challenge is to dig in to the real issues.'* This assessment seems to grasp the point and is worth bearing in mind when sitting on a judging panel.



**“A COMPLEX  
WORLD REQUIRES  
THE CAPACITY  
TO MARSHALL  
CHALLENGING IDEAS  
AND ARGUMENTS”**

**LORD BOATENG, FORMER BRITISH HIGH  
COMMISSIONER TO SOUTH AFRICA**