

Interventions

‘No system of government can or should be imposed upon one nation by any other’.

— US President Barack Obama, from his address to the Muslim world, Cairo, Egypt, 4 June 2009.

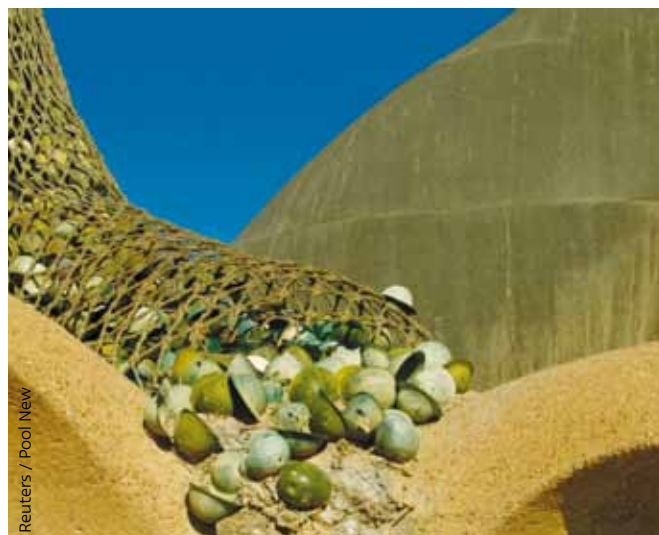
Interventions in unstable countries only make situations worse, according to Isabelle Duyvesteyn of Utrecht University, the Netherlands. In a recent paper, *The Intervention Paradox*, Duyvesteyn says that intervening puts target countries in an ‘out of the frying pan and into the fire’ situation. 📖 Yet governments have many reasons to intervene in other countries. The so-called democratic peace theory had ‘proven’ that democratic countries are less inclined to engage in war, so it seemed wise to start exporting democracy – even forcefully, as the Bush administration tried to do in Iraq in 2003. But ‘democratic peace’ is a very tricky export product, even more so to countries where the intervention is nothing less than state-building from scratch.

Duyvesteyn bases her ‘don’t intervene’ dictum on a broad literature study. Although war has often bred new states – even successful ones – these states mostly came into being after a self-induced yet no less painful labour. Foreign interventions, on the other hand, may well cause miscarriages. In that respect Duyvesteyn is right. Are successful states – let’s say, the Western European countries – the result of UN resolutions or, for example, an ‘Operation Dutch Freedom’ intervention? Clearly they are not.

Too often terms such as ‘rebuilding’ or ‘re-establishing’ are laced into the text of an intervention prospectus. But these terms suggest that there were decent public institutions to begin with. But were there really?

Interventions that aim for regime change moreover create a dilemma of legitimacy. The old regime is declared illegitimate, and is replaced by a new legitimate one. That is a regrettable simplification of reality. We all know that ‘good’ and ‘evil’ are not so black and white. How often did the US doubt during its ‘rebuilding’ of Iraq whether the complete elimination of the Sunni Ba’ath elite from the Iraqi government had been wise? Is the rebuilding of Afghanistan and the promise of security thinkable without there being a role for the former warlords and their militias in that country?

In view of this, Duyvesteyn cites (and agrees with) experts who urge us to recognize the importance of patrimonialism as a source of legitimacy and effectiveness. With



patrimonialism the hierarchy is clear, and everybody knows their position. It is a prime source of legitimacy. If the intervening country becomes deeply involved in the target country for a lengthy period it is likely to become part of the problem rather than the solution – either as the leading but illegitimate bearer of order, or as the pivotal institution in policy making. Its very presence may be so overpowering that it stifles the development of promising indigenous elements of state-building. In other words, says Duyvesteyn, ‘intervening forces do not necessarily hold the key to successful state-building. Legitimate order and institutions are formed from the bottom-up and hardly ever as a social engineering project from the top-down’.

The implications of this approach are anything but trivial. The ultimate consequence may even be a plea for ‘autonomous recovery’ of failed states, non-interference in other words, even when there is an ongoing local war.

Are these rather controversial thoughts at odds with the findings of the Human Security Report Project (HSRP), which leans towards recommending intervention as a remedy for failing states and a cure for armed conflicts (although it does not recommend armed interventions, except as a last resort)? The answer is yes. The findings of the HSRP indicate that *sustained* meddling, including the use of stabilizing (military) forces, can end conflicts and will favour the chances of successful mediation, armed truce and reconciliation. Therefore, I conclude that we shouldn’t embrace the *laissez-faire* approach too eagerly, but instead try and combine the HSRP optimism with the warnings of Duyvesteyn that due attention to the advantages of autonomous recovery is indispensable. I am as yet not convinced that interventions do more harm than good. ■

📖 A longer version of this column, with references, can be found at www.thebrokeronline.eu.

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