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Docherty, B., Mathieu, X. and Ralph, J. (2020) R2P and the Arab Spring: Norm localisation and the US response to the early Syria crisis. *Global Responsibility to Protect*, 12 (3). pp. 246-270. ISSN: 1875-984X

<https://doi.org/10.1163/1875-984X-20200005>

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R2P and the Arab Spring: Norm Localisation and the US Response to the Early Syria Crisis

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Abstract

This article explains why R2P failed to motivate action to protect vulnerable Syrians in the first two years of the crisis. We focus on the United States and argue that official discourse ‘localised’ the meaning R2P by grafting it on to preconceived ideas of America’s role in supporting democratic revolutions, which is how the situation was understood. American ‘exemplarism’ demanded the US support democracy by calling on Assad to go while not corrupting the ‘homegrown’ revolution through foreign intervention. The call for political and criminal accountability aligned exemplarist democracy promotion to R2P, but it did nothing to protect vulnerable populations from the conflict that ensued. This refraction of the norm complicated the United Nations sponsored peace process, which provided an alternative means of protecting the Syrian population. We address a gap in the literature by examining Western localisation and draw policy lessons, namely the importance of examining national predispositions when implementing R2P.

Keywords

R2P – Syria – norms – localisation – United States – exemplarism

Syria remains one of the most challenging of humanitarian crises and has been at the top of the international agenda for almost a decade. Various senior diplomats have spoken not just of the scale of suffering but of international society's responsibility to protect the Syrian population from atrocities. This was apparent very early in the crisis. The Office of the United Nations Special Adviser for the Prevention of Genocide and Responsibility to Protect (R2P), for instance, issued eight statements regarding Syria between 2011 and 2013,¹ and the Obama administration wrestled publicly with its sense that something must be done, accepting that 'the moral thing to do is not to stand by and do nothing'.² But while US foreign policymakers referenced a responsibility to protect Syrian populations, occasionally referring directly to the UN's 'R2P' doctrine, it was by no means certain what those references meant for practice. This uncertainty is indicative of the indeterminate character of norms; their meaning is constructed through discursive practice and is thus contingent on how agents interpret a particular situation, which can lead to contestation.³ In the case of Syria, 'applying' generic meanings of R2P, such as those articulated in the 2001 report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) or in the 2005 UN World Summit outcome document, told us that something had to be done to protect Syrian populations. It did not offer uncontested prescriptions for practice. This is all the truer in this case as R2P was not the only norm or principle guiding the US response to Syria.⁴

1 Out of a total of 22 statements issued overall during 2011–2013 inclusive. UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, 'Public Statements', <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/public-statements.shtml>, accessed 7 February 2020.

2 Barack Obama, 'Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Reinfeldt of Sweden in Joint Press Conference', 4 September 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/04/remarks-president-obama-and-prime-minister-reinfeldt-sweden-joint-press->, accessed 7 May 2019.

3 Antje Wiener, 'Contested Meanings of Norms: A Research Framework', *Comparative European Politics*, 5/1: 1–17 (2007); Antje Wiener, 'Enacting Meaning-in-Use: Qualitative Research on Norms and International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, 35/1: 175–193 (2009); Mona L. Krook and Jacqui True, 'Rethinking the Life Cycles of International Norms: The United Nations and the Global Promotion of Gender Equality', *European Journal of International Relations*, 18/1: 103–127 (2010).

4 Other considerations came into play, including other norms and more prudential considerations. See, for instance, the interview of Barack Obama by Jeffrey Goldberg, 'The Obama Doctrine', *The Atlantic*, April 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>, accessed 7 February 2020. As such, we do not argue that R2P was the main influencing factor, nor that it played a direct causal role in the US response to the Syrian crisis. Rather, we want to explore how R2P helped to enable US policies that ultimately failed to protect the Syrian population.

It is in this discursive space that agents often graft on to a norm's meaning their particular predispositions. Building on the idea of 'norm localisation'⁵ as a practice by which local actors actively build congruence between global norms and local beliefs, identities, traditions, practices, cognitive priors or normative context, we explore how R2P was localised so as to become congruent with the broader pre-existing American normative political context which supported non-intervention. We demonstrate how the US understanding of its responsibility to protect Syrian populations was influenced by beliefs, identities, traditions, and practices of American exceptionalism, and argue that this local American cognitive prior or normative context influenced America's framing of the Syrian situation primarily as a struggle for democracy.⁶ Supporting that struggle helped reconstitute America's image as a state that was 'on the right side of history'. At the same time, however, the Obama administration adopted an 'exemplarist' rather than a 'vindicationist' form of exceptionalism.⁷ As such, the US would be the 'well-wisher' of the Syrian people as they resisted Assad, but it would not intervene.

In exploring this case, this article makes three interlinked contributions. First, and at the empirical level, we provide an in-depth example of R2P norm localisation, showing how American policymakers, through discourse, framing, and grafting, brought R2P into congruence with local beliefs and practices of American exceptionalism, specifically exemplarism. Secondly, we have identified and helped to address a gap in the R2P norm localisation literature. Although Amitav Acharya theorised localisation was open to any actors, irrespective of their size or international prominence,⁸ the existing R2P localisation literature focuses almost exclusively on cases where the non-Western world is the localising actor.⁹ By showing how a leading Western actor localised

5 Amitav Acharya, 'How Ideas Spread: Whose Norms Matter? Norm Localization and Institutional Change in Asian Regionalism', *International Organization*, 58/2: 239–275 (2004); Amitav Acharya, *Whose Ideas Matter: Agency and Power in Asian Regionalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009); David Capie, 'The Responsibility to Protect Norm in Southeast Asia: Framing, Resistance and the Localization Myth', *The Pacific Review*, 25/1: 75–93 (2012); Kai Michael Kenkel and Felipe De Rosa, 'Localization and Subsidiarity in Brazil's Engagement with the Responsibility to Protect', *Global Responsibility to Protect*, 7/3–4: 325–349 (2015).

6 As such, our focus is primarily on the United States itself, and we only make references to the 'local' Syrian views as and when they enter the US debate.

7 H. W. Brands, *What America Owes the World: The Struggle for the Soul of Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

8 Amitav Acharya, 'Norm Subsidiarity and Regional Orders: Sovereignty, Regionalism, and Rule-Making in the Third World', *International Studies Quarterly*, 55/1: 95–123 (2011), p. 98.

9 For exceptions see Jocelyn Vaughan and Tim Dunne, 'Leading from the Front: America, Libya and the Localisation of R2P', *Cooperation and Conflict* 50/1: 29–49 (2015); Eglantine Staunton and Jason Ralph, 'The Responsibility to Protect Norm Cluster and the Challenge of Atrocity

the R2P norm, we complement the existing literature, thus helping avoid any misconception that R2P localisation is purely a non-Western phenomenon or that the West alone is associated with the 'global' R2P. Finally, we explain how norm localisation can have a significant impact on the practical decisions taken by states. US discourse indeed infused R2P with its own meanings which affected the way it (and a number of other actors) responded to the Syrian crisis. In particular, the localisation we explore made two decisions particularly unlikely: a direct intervention and a negotiated solution with the Syrian regime. With this localisation of R2P, the United States thus restricted its own policy choices (and that of other international actors) while prolonging the Syrian conflict.

This article is organised into three sections. First, we analyse how the R2P literature has used the notion of 'norm localisation' to study local variants of the global R2P norm. We demonstrate that the focus of these analyses has almost exclusively been on the ways non-Western actors have localised R2P, which, given the specific claim by Acharya that localisation applies to all actors, means there is a gap in the literature. We reflect on the implications of this gap, and therefore the need to complement existing work by examining how a Western actor such as the United States localised R2P. In the second section, we explain how US officials referred to the norm of R2P and localised it by insisting on regime change in Syria. We make these claims through an analysis of both executive and legislative American discourses. Our dataset is composed of 658 texts comprising declarations and interviews by the President, Vice-President, Secretary of State, White House officials, as well as Congressional and Senate hearings that mention or are connected to Syria. We analysed these texts for discursive patterns or 'linguistic regularities' that 'create a relative predictability in meaning production'.¹⁰ The data covers the period of March 2011 to December 2013, from the beginning of the crisis to the aftermath of the August 2013 Ghouta chemical weapons attacks. This period is crucial as it represents the moment in which the US formed its position on the Syrian crisis. Far from being an obvious or necessary choice, linking R2P to regime change appealed to American domestic values and to the broader perception of the 'Arab Spring' as a progressive evolution of history. As we explain in the third section, however, this invocation of R2P and exceptionalism was highly influenced by the 'exemplarist' strand of thought. As a consequence, the commitment to protect the Syrian population from atrocity crimes – which is

Prevention: An Analysis of the European Union's Strategy in Myanmar', *European Journal of International Relations*, online, 1 November 2019. See also footnote 15.

10 Jason Ralph, Jack Holland and Kalina Zhekova, 'Before the Vote: UK Foreign Policy Discourse on Syria 2011–13', *Review of International Studies*, 43/5: 875–897 (2017), p. 879.

the essence of R2P – was dwarfed by a need to respect the Syrian democratic uprising as a local and indigenous movement for which the US could only provide an example.

1 Norm Localisation, R2P and the West

Localisation has become a key framework for scholars interested in norm diffusion at the international level. It has been applied to a variety of topics,¹¹ among them R2P. Yet the R2P norm localisation literature, with the exception by Vaughan and Dunne, and more recently, Staunton and Ralph,¹² focuses on

11 A 20 September 2019 Web of Science topic search for ‘norm localization’ and ‘norm localisation’ between 2004 and 2019 generated 25 politics and international relations results, including: David Capie, ‘Localization as Resistance: The Contested Diffusion of Small Arms Norms in Southeast Asia’, *Security Dialogue*, 39/6: 637–658 (2008); Allan Collins, ‘Norm Diffusion and ASEAN’s Adoption and Adaption of Global HIV/AIDS Norms’, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 13/3: 369–397 (2013); Sarai B. Aharoni, ‘Internal Variation in Norm Localization: Implementing Security Council Resolution 1325 in Israel’, *Social Politics*, 21/1: 1–25 (2014); Oliver Hesengert, ‘Global Norms in Domestic Politics: Environmental Norm Contestation in Cambodia’s Hydropower Sector’, *The Pacific Review*, 28/4: 505–528 (2015); Lisbeth Zimmerman, *Global Norms with a Local Face. Rule of Law Promotion and Norm Translation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Lisbeth Zimmerman, ‘Same Same or Different? Norm Diffusion Between Resistance, Compliance, and Localization in Post-Conflict States’, *International Studies Perspectives*, 17/1: 98–115 (2016); Lisbeth Zimmerman, Nicole Deitelhoff and Max Lesch, ‘Unlocking the Agency of the Governed: Contestation and Norm Dynamics’, *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal*, 2/5: 691–708 (2017); Elias Steinhilper, ‘From “the Rest” to “the West”? Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the Western Bias in Norm Diffusion Research’, *International Studies Review*, 17/4: 536–555 (2015).

12 Vaughan and Dunne, ‘Leading from the Front’; Staunton and Ralph, ‘The Responsibility to Protect Norm Cluster’. Matthias Dembinski and Berenike Schott, ‘Regional Security Arrangements as a Filter for Norm Diffusion: The African Union, the European Union and the Responsibility to Protect’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 27/2: 362–380 (2014) is another rare exception albeit with a dual focus. Likewise Carla Barqueiro, Kate Seaman and Katherine T. Towey, ‘Regional Organizations and Responsibility to Protect: Normative Reframing or Normative Change?’, *Politics and Governance*, 4/3: 37–49 (2016) explore regional divergences on R2P implementation between the European Union (EU), but also League of Arab States (LAS), and the African Union (AU) on Libya and Syria. Eglantine Staunton, ‘France and the Responsibility to Protect: A Tale of Two Norms’, *International Relations*, 32/3: 366–387 (2018) applies localisation as one part of a four-part theoretical framework, whereas we choose to focus on it exclusively.

how the non-Western world (for instance, Africa;¹³ Brazil;¹⁴ China and Japan;¹⁵ and Southeast Asia)¹⁶ localises R2P. In this section, we review this literature to define the concept, to establish the gap regarding its application to the West, and to assess the implications. We then examine in more detail the Vaughan and Dunne article as the only work to apply norm localisation to the US relationship with R2P.¹⁷

Acharya outlined two perspectives on norm diffusion: one spoke to a 'moral cosmopolitanism', and another stressed 'the role of domestic, political, organizational, and cultural variables', albeit in an 'unduly static' manner that described them as barriers to diffusion.¹⁸ The main features of the first perspective were that the norms researched were 'cosmopolitan' or 'universal'. The key actors involved were transnational agents and the focus was on the 'conversion' of local agents, whose 'resistance' to cosmopolitan norms was seen as 'illegitimate or immoral' rather than 'contestation'. Unfortunate consequences of this approach followed. These included a focus on the international level, therefore 'downplaying the agency of local actors'; a view of norm diffusion that implied 'teaching by transnational agents'; and a portrayal of 'international prescriptions' as one part of 'an implicit dichotomy between good global or universal norms and bad regional or local norms'.¹⁹

- 13 Paul D. Williams, 'From Non-intervention to Non-indifference: The Origins and Development of the African Union's Security Culture', *African Affairs*, 106/423: 253–279 (2007); Paul D. Williams, 'The 'Responsibility to Protect', Norm Localisation, and African International Society', *Global Responsibility to Protect*, 1/3: 392–416 (2009).
- 14 Kenkel and De Rosa, 'Localization and Subsidiarity in Brazil's Engagement with the Responsibility to Protect'; Cristina G. Stefan, 'On Non-Western Norm Shapers: Brazil and the Responsibility while Protecting', *European Journal of International Security*, 2/1: 88–110 (2017).
- 15 Jochen Prantl and Ryoko Nakano, 'Global Norm Diffusion in East Asia: How China and Japan Implement the Responsibility to Protect', *International Relations*, 25/2: 204–223 (June 2011).
- 16 Alex J. Bellamy and Mark Beeson, 'The Responsibility to Protect in Southeast Asia: Can ASEAN Reconcile Humanitarianism and Sovereignty?', *Asian Security*, 6/3: 262–279 (2010); Alex J. Bellamy and Sarah E. Davies, 'The Responsibility to Protect in the Asia-Pacific Region', *Security Dialogue*, 40/6: 547–574 (2011); Alex J. Bellamy and Catherine Drummond, 'The Responsibility to Protect in Southeast Asia: Between Non-interference and Sovereignty as Responsibility', *The Pacific Review*, 24/2: 179–200 (2011); Capie, 'The Responsibility to Protect Norm'; Herman Kraft, 'RtoP by Increments: The AICHR and Localizing the Responsibility to Protect in Southeast Asia', *The Pacific Review*, 25/1 Special Issue: 27–49 (2012).
- 17 Vaughan and Dunne, 'Leading from the Front'.
- 18 Acharya, 'How Ideas Spread', pp. 242–243.
- 19 *ibid.*, p. 242.

It was on the basis of this critique that Acharya proposed the concept of norm localisation or constitutive localisation,²⁰ which, according to Capie, 'represents a significant break with orthodox explanations of norm dynamics' whose cosmopolitan advocates tended to be typically Western states and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the global north.²¹ Acharya defined localisation as 'the active construction (through discourse, framing, grafting, and cultural selection) of foreign ideas by local actors, which results in the former developing significant congruence with local beliefs and practices'.²² Rather than facing a dichotomy of either *accepting* or *rejecting* foreign norms, localisation conceptualises how local actors can incorporate the foreign into the local even when it did not initially appear to cohere.

Although developed by Acharya in reference to Southeast Asia,²³ and with a view to addressing the 'general neglect of the normative behavior of Third World countries and their regional institutions in the growing literature on norm dynamics', norm localisation is 'generic to all actors, big or small, powerful or weak'.²⁴ The broader literature on norm localisation includes some work exploring how Western countries themselves adapt global norms.²⁵ Yet the R2P norm localisation literature has thus far tended to focus on cases in which non-Western actors are engaged in localisation such as: Africa, Brazil, China and Japan, and Southeast Asia.²⁶ This is not a criticism of this body of work. Indeed, the choice of non-Western actors makes sense given each author's relevant regional expertise and deliberate focus.

We are not suggesting that this literature assumes R2P localisation to be an exclusively non-Western phenomenon. To repeat Acharya, norm localisation is 'generic to all actors'.²⁷ But the relative lack of studies examining R2P localisation by Western actors does risk this association. Conscious of how scholarship

20 He subsequently proposed 'norm subsidiarity' which he classified as: outward looking; based on a rejection of the external norm which is regarded as a threat to local norms; and an activity which is the preserve of small or peripheral international actors. Acharya, 'Norm Subsidiarity and Regional Orders', p. 97. Given our exclusive focus on how the US – a powerful actor – made R2P fit within its own normative context, with attention only to domestic political constituencies, our research falls under the framework of localisation rather than subsidiarity.

21 Capie, 'The Responsibility to Protect Norm', p. 79.

22 Acharya, 'How Ideas Spread', pp. 245.

23 Acharya, 'How Ideas Spread'; Acharya, *Whose Ideas Matter*.

24 Acharya, 'Norm Subsidiarity and Regional Orders', pp. 95, 98.

25 For example, in Peggy Levitt and Sally Merry, 'Vernacularization on the Ground: Local Uses of Global Women's Rights in Peru, India, China, and the US', *Global Networks*, 9/4: 441–461 (2009). See also footnote 14.

26 See footnotes 16–19.

27 Acharya, 'Norm Subsidiarity and Regional Orders', pp. 95, 98.

constructs background knowledge, we consider it important for normative reasons to address this imbalance in R2P studies. This is because an association of 'the local' with non-Western states may imply that 'the global' interpretation of a norm is taken from Western meanings. Western states could then in turn claim unwarranted authority as spokespersons for what they claim to be the 'true' or 'genuine' expression of R2P on the grounds that since non-Western states localise it, Western states adopt it as is. We note here for instance that 20 of the 37 states which Negrón-Gonzales and Contarino identified in 2014 as having 'embraced' R2P were Western/European²⁸ while those then rejecting or adapting the norm were all non-Western.²⁹

To argue that Western states have, and therefore can, determine the meaning of R2P is not only normatively problematic, it is empirically incorrect. No single state nor regional grouping of states speaks for the global R2P. For instance, there is a broad recognition of Africa's significant role in the emergence and formation of R2P to the extent that 'the deepening of international society originated to a great extent from the periphery rather than the core',³⁰ via the efforts of Francis Deng,³¹ Kofi Annan, and Article 4(h) of the Constitutive Act of the African Union.³² The International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty specifically included a genuinely cosmopolitan membership.³³ The globally inclusive UN has also been important in defining

28 Our definition of Western countries is based on those who are member of the UN regional group, Western European and Others Group (WEOG). This has 28 member states, plus one member state (the United States) as an observer state. United Nations Department for General Assembly and Conference Management, 'UN Regional Groups of Member States', <http://www.un.org/Depts/DGACM/RegionalGroups.shtml>, accessed 7 February 2020.

29 Melinda Negrón-Gonzales and Michael Contarino, 'Local Norms Matter: Understanding National Responses to the Responsibility to Protect', *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations*, 20/2: 255–276 (2014), p. 262.

30 Prantl and Nakano, 'Global Norm Diffusion in East Asia', p. 207. See also Oliver Stuenkel, 'Who Will Write about R2P's African Origins?', 9 December 2012, <https://www.postwesternworld.com/2012/12/09/who-will-write-about-r2ps-african-origins/>, accessed 25 April 2019.

31 Working alongside Roberta Cohen.

32 Article 4(h) established as a guiding principle 'the right of the Union to intervene in a Member State pursuant to a decision of the Assembly in respect of grave circumstances, namely: war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity'. The Act is regarded as the first international treaty to explicitly make such a principled commitment. Organization of African Unity (OAU), *Constitutive Act of the African Union*, p. 7, https://au.int/sites/default/files/pages/34873-file-constitutiveact_en.pdf, accessed 13 November 2019.

33 The twelve commissioners being drawn from Australia, Algeria, Canada, the United States, Russia, Germany, South Africa, the Philippines, Switzerland, Guatemala, and India. International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS), *The Responsibility to Protect* (Ottawa: IDRC, 2001), pp. 77–79.

the norm's framework through the 2005 World Summit Outcomes Document, and regular General Assembly informal debates from 2009, Security Council resolutions and reports instigated by the then Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon of South Korea. Finally, Western advocacy efforts by the likes of Canada³⁴ and Australia³⁵ have been accompanied by those of Brazil,³⁶ Guatemala,³⁷ and Rwanda,³⁸ among many others.³⁹

Yet it remains the case that the majority of R2P scholarship using the concept of norm localisation has been focused on non-Western cases, often but not always juxtaposing their non-Western 'local' with an unspecified or under-theorised 'global'.⁴⁰ To be clear, these authors are likely reflecting contemporary perspectives of R2P in the non-Western world rather than consciously constructing a Western-global / non-Western-local dichotomy; and there is of course a large literature on how Western states relate to R2P.⁴¹ Yet this latter

34 Prantl and Nakano, 'Global Norm Diffusion in East Asia', p. 208.

35 Capie, 'The Responsibility to Protect Norm', pp. 86–87.

36 See the speech given by Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff before the 66th UN General Assembly, 21 September 2011 (see A/66/PV.11) and the follow up 'Responsibility while Protecting' concept note submitted for discussion by the UN Security Council at the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflicts meeting, S/PV.6650, 11 November 2011, UN Doc. A/66/551–S/2011/701, 11 November 2011.

37 Guatemala led the drafting on behalf of 66 delegations of the first UN General Assembly Resolution regarding R2P – A/RES/63/308 as adopted in 14 September 2009, A/63/PV.105.

38 Rwanda has co-chaired the R2P Group of Friends. See 'Statement on Behalf of the Group of Friends of R2P at 36th Session of the Human Rights Council', 12 September 2017, <https://www.globalr2p.org/resources/statement-on-behalf-of-the-group-of-friends-of-r2p-at-36th-session-of-the-human-rights-council/> accessed 10 June 2020.

39 We are grateful here to the comments on an anonymous reviewer who specified in detail the work of the 'Global Network of R2P Focal Points' whose eighth annual meeting was co-hosted by Finland and Mexico, 'Summary of the Eighth Annual Meeting of the Global Network of R2P Focal Points Helsinki, Finland, 2018', 28 September 2018, <https://www.globalr2p.org/publications/summary-of-the-eighth-annual-meeting-of-the-global-network-of-r2p-focal-points-helsinki-finland-june-2018/>, accessed 20 September 2019; and 'Global Action Against Mass Atrocity Crimes' (GAAMAC) whose March 2013 founding state partners included: Argentina, Switzerland, Tanzania, Australia, Costa Rica, and Denmark, GAAMAC, 'History', <https://www.gaamac.org/information-platform-www/web-pages/view/1>, accessed 20 September 2019.

40 Kenkel and De Rosa, 'Localization and Subsidiarity in Brazil's Engagement with the Responsibility to Protect', p. 333.

41 Sarah Brockmeier, Gerrit Kurtz and Julian Junk, 'Emerging Norm and Rhetorical Tool: Europe and a Responsibility to Protect', *Conflict, Security & Development*, 14/4: 429–460 (2014); Alex J. Bellamy, 'The Responsibility to Protect and Australian Foreign Policy', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 64/4: 432–448 (2010); Chiara De Franco, Christoph Meyer and Karen E. Smith, 'Europe and the European Union' in Alex J. Bellamy and Tim Dunne (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Responsibility to Protect* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Bruce W. Jentleson, 'The Obama Administration and R2P: Progress,

body of work focuses on various Western states' attempts to implement or internalise the norm and does not frame that process in terms of localisation studies. In sum there is a gap in the R2P localisation literature when it comes to Western cases of localisation, with potentially troubling implications, which we look to address by complementing existing non-Western studies with one from the US.

The exception to this trend which we build on is Vaughan and Dunne's examination of the US localisation and implementation of R2P in the case of the 2011 Libyan intervention. They argue that the Obama administration's Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention/Protection (GMAPP) policy was the US's localisation of the global R2P norm, which informed and facilitated their leadership role in the intervention. As the authors rightly indicate, the way that norms matter can differ across distinct cases, and 'even liberal states – whose self-identities include the promotion of values such as human rights, political freedoms and freedom from persecution – vary considerably with each other in how they align their responsibility to protect with domestic thresholds and identity'.⁴² Their analysis is thus important because it demonstrates the adaptations that are made by a Western state. It confirms our assessment of the existing literature, noting as they do, that 'these differences and convergences between R2P and GMAPP conform to the expectations set out in the literature on norm localisation. *In this instance, however, it is not middle and small powers outside the liberal order that are experiencing localisation. It happens to world powers too*' [emphasis added].⁴³

Vaughan and Dunne demonstrate how the United States localised R2P as GMAPP, as well as how GMAPP applied in the case of Libya. Ultimately their focus is on accounting for the US leadership role in the 2011 Libyan intervention. As a consequence, some questions remain unanswered. In particular, and crucially for the understanding of when the US might intervene, the GMAPP does not 'clarify the conditions under which coercive instruments would be used to respond to mass atrocities' and it does not 'answer divisive questions about

Problems and Prospects', *Global Responsibility to Protect*, 4/4: 399–423 (2012); Bruce W. Jentleson, 'United States' in Alex J. Bellamy and Tim Dunne (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Responsibility to Protect* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Julian Junk, 'The Two-Level Politics of Support – US Foreign Policy and the Responsibility to Protect', *Conflict, Security & Development*, 14/4: 535–564 (2014); Edward Newman and Cristina Stefan, 'Normative Power Europe? The EU's Embrace of the "Responsibility to Protect" in a Transitional International Order', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, online, 25 July 2019; Jason Ralph, *Mainstreaming the Responsibility to Protect in UK Strategy*, UNA-UK Briefing Report No. 2 (United Nations Association-UK, 2014).

42 Vaughan and Dunne, 'Leading from the Front', pp. 43, 31.

43 *ibid.*, pp. 30–36, 44.

who should intervene (unilateral or multilateral), when (threshold, conditions), where (selectivity) or how (strategy, doctrine, command and control).⁴⁴ The local US variant of R2P thus seems to remain purposefully open about the key questions raised by R2P's Pillar 3.⁴⁵ As the authors note, 'the precise conditions under which the [US Government] would be prepared to respond militarily to mass atrocities remains underdeveloped in terms of the policies and processes associated with GMAPP'.⁴⁶

Vaughan and Dunne also recognise that norm meanings can change for each case under study. It is to one of these cases that we now turn. In the following section, we demonstrate how official US discourse localised the meaning of R2P in the initial phase of the Syria conflict. Rather than looking at how R2P was localised by America's own atrocity prevention norm at an institutional level within a bureaucratic context, we explore how the meaning of R2P in discursive use was grafted on to the cultural tropes associated with American exceptionalism so as to build congruence between R2P and local American beliefs, identities, traditions, and preferences.

2 Localising R2P: Regime Change and the Inevitability of Liberalism

American policy discourse on Syria responded to several considerations, some normative and some strategic or prudential, yet it also included explicit references to R2P and the responsibility of states to protect vulnerable populations. The discourse was also imbued with references to local American values and traditions that enabled US policymakers to graft R2P onto their pre-existing local culture. In particular, and as we demonstrate in this section, R2P became discursively tied to the idea of 'regime change', which was prevalent in the American interpretation of the Arab Spring. From the beginning of the Syrian crisis in 2011, American policymakers made repeated references to R2P. The draft UN Security Council resolution of 4 October 2011 supported by the nine Council members including the US (but vetoed by Russia and China, with four abstentions) cited R2P when insisting on 'the Syrian Government's primary responsibility to protect its population'.⁴⁷ President Obama echoed this several

44 *ibid.*, p. 34.

45 Ban Ki-moon, *Implementing the Responsibility to Protect*, A/63/677, 12 January 2009, pp. 2, 22–27.

46 *ibid.*, p. 44.

47 United Nations Security Council, 'France, Germany, Portugal and United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland: Draft Resolution', S/2011/612, 4 October 2011, http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2011/612, accessed 19 March 2019.

months later, stating that ‘every government has the responsibility to protect its citizens, and any government that brutalizes and massacres its people does not deserve to govern’.⁴⁸ This was repeated across the administration. Secretary of State Clinton, for instance, explained that ‘it is against every norm of international law and human decency for a government to be murdering its own people’.⁴⁹ Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Wendy Sherman identified ‘the duty of every responsible nation shares to protect civilians under attack’.⁵⁰ R2P also informed Congressional discourse: an April 2012 Senate resolution stated that ‘since the uprisings in Syria began in January 2011, the Government of Syria has manifestly failed in its responsibility to protect its people’.⁵¹ At the end of 2013, the R2P discourse appeared well-established: in the words of the White House Press Secretary ‘The Syrian government must respect its obligations under international humanitarian law to protect the civilian population’.⁵²

Yet in the American discourse on Syria and R2P there were also repeated calls for regime change, and these calls were influenced by a specific localisation of R2P in US values and identities. From this perspective, as in the Obama reference cited above, the regime that was unwilling to protect its citizens, and indeed targeted them, did not deserve to govern. Calling for regime change and democracy can indeed be consistent with the aim of protecting a population from atrocity crimes but R2P is not intrinsically attached to regime

48 Barack Obama, ‘Statement by the President on Syria’, 4 February 2012, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/02/04/statement-president-syria>, accessed 25 February 2019. A year later, Obama would also declare: ‘what the Syrian regime is doing is unacceptable. It is contrary to every international norm that we believe in’. Barack Obama, ‘Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Cameron of the United Kingdom in a Joint Press Conference’, 14 March 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/03/14/remarks-president-obama-and-prime-minister-cameron-united-kingdom-joint->, accessed 19 March 2019.

49 Hillary Clinton, ‘Remarks at the Friends of the Syrian People Ministerial Meeting’, 6 July 2012, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2012/07/194628.htm>, accessed 25 February 2019.

50 Wendy R. Sherman, ‘Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Affairs House of Representatives – 14 October 2011’ (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2011).

51 United States Senate, ‘Senate Resolution 428 – Condemning the Government of Syria for Crimes against Humanity, and for Other Purposes’, 19 April 2012, <https://www.congress.gov/congressional-record/2012/4/19/senate-section/article/s2551-2?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22syria%22%5D%7D&resultIndex=146>, accessed 19 March 2019.

52 Jay Carney, ‘Statement by Press Secretary Jay Carney on the Ongoing Air Assaults by the Syrian Government’, 23 December 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/12/23/statement-press-secretary-jay-carney-ongoing-air-assaults-syrian-governm>, accessed 19 March 2019.

change or even democracy promotion.⁵³ The then Special Advisor to the UN Secretary-General, Edward Luck argued:

I should say that it isn't the goal of the responsibility to protect to change regimes. The goal is to protect populations. It may be in some cases that the only way to protect populations is to change the regime, but that certainly is not the goal of the R2P per se.⁵⁴

The Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect argued during this period that 'R2P should be the constructive context to frame [Kofi Annan's] heightened diplomatic effort',⁵⁵ which in 2012 focused on establishing a peacekeeping force with the consent of the parties and Security Council backing.⁵⁶ But in the American ideational context, a change of regime in Syria was deemed necessary *and* inevitable. Indeed, because Syrian President Assad's removal from power was framed in the wider context of the Arab Spring, which had seen regional dictators fall, it was considered part of the inexorable 'movement of history'; and because Assad's fall was inevitable it enabled the US to commit to regime change without thinking of the means or costs of realising that commitment. This idealistic view about 'being on the right side of history',⁵⁷ which is prevalent in discourses that construct an American sense of exceptionalism, influenced how US responsibilities to the Syrian population were understood. As such, calling for regime change became the way the US would discharge its responsibility in this particular situation.

After their first invocations of R2P, it was not long into the crisis that US policy shifted to 'regime change'. Articulated rather hesitantly at first,⁵⁸ this

53 For further discussion see Staunton and Ralph, *'The Responsibility to Protect Norm Cluster'*.

54 Council on Foreign Relations, 'Interview: Will Syria Follow Libya? Interviewee: Edward C. Luck, Special Advisor to the UN Secretary-General, Interviewer: Bernard Gwertzman, Visiting Fellow', 1 September 2011, <https://www.cfr.org/syria/syria-follow-libya/p25745>, accessed 7 February 2020. See also Alex J. Bellamy, 'The Responsibility to Protect and the Problem of Regime Change', 27 September 2011, <https://www.e-ir.info/2011/09/27/the-responsibility-to-protect-and-the-problem-of-regime-change/>, accessed 7 February 2020.

55 Simon Adams, 'A Diplomatic Surge for Syria?', *Huffington Post*, 2 October 2012.

56 What's in Blue, 'Syria Draft Presidential Statement', 4 April 2012, <https://www.whatsinblue.org/2012/04/syria-draft-presidential-statement.php#>, accessed 7 February 2020.

57 Hillary Clinton, 'Press Availability on the Meeting of the Friends of the Syrian People', 24 February 2012, <http://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2012/02/184635.htm>, accessed 19 March 2019; Jay Carney, 'Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney', 19 March 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/03/19/press-briefing-press-secretary-jay-carney-31912>, accessed 25 February 2019.

58 See the reluctance of Ambassador Feltman to explicitly recognise change of regime as the position of the US in July 2011. Jeffrey Feltman, 'Hearing before the Subcommittee on the

policy became the official one from August 2011 onwards. That month, Obama made a clear statement calling for Assad to leave:

The future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al-Assad is standing in their way. His calls for dialogue and reform have rung hollow while he is imprisoning, torturing, and slaughtering his own people. We have consistently said that President Assad must lead a democratic transition or get out of the way. He has not led. For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside.⁵⁹

This call was taken up by Clinton⁶⁰ and repeated by various other administration officials as well as in Congress. The White House Press Secretary, for instance, declared that 'President Assad must step down now before taking his country further down this very dangerous path'.⁶¹ Vice-President Biden reinforced this position when he said that 'President Obama and I and nearly all of our partners and allies are convinced that President Assad, a tyrant, hell-bent on clinging to power, is no longer fit to lead the Syrian people and he must go'.⁶² Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes declared that 'the United States believes that any transition in Syria has to involve Bashar al-Assad leaving power' and insisted that it was not the state or the institutions that should be changed but Assad himself and 'the top of his

Middle East and South Asia – July 27, 2011' (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2011).

59 Barack Obama, 'Statement by President Obama on the Situation in Syria', 18 August 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/08/18/statement-president-obama-situation-syria>, accessed 25 February 2019.

60 Hillary Clinton, 'Remarks with Norwegian Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Stoere after Their Meeting', 12 August 2011, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/08/170501.htm>, accessed 25 February 2019.

61 Jay Carney, 'Statement by the Press Secretary on Violence in Syria', 7 October 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/10/07/statement-press-secretary-violence-syria>, accessed 25 February 2019. Similar calls are made in Jay Carney, 'Press Gaggle by Press Secretary Jay Carney Aboard Air Force One', 19 July 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/07/19/press-gaggle-press-secretary-jay-carney-aboard-air-force-one-7192012>, accessed 19 March 2019; Jay Carney, 'Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney', 18 July 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/07/18/press-briefing-press-secretary-jay-carney-7182013>, accessed 25 February 2019.

62 Joe Biden, 'Remarks by Vice President Joe Biden to the Munich Security Conference. Hotel Bayerischer Hof Munich, Germany', 2 February 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/02/02/remarks-vice-president-joe-biden-munich-security-conference-hotel-bayeri>, accessed 25 February 2019.

regime'.⁶³ The US Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford also expressed this opinion in a direct way in front of the Senate: 'Assad has lost all legitimacy and must go'.⁶⁴ Obama reiterated this exact same call numerous times: 'Assad needs to go. He needs to transfer power to a transitional body. That is the only way that we're going to resolve this crisis'.⁶⁵

It was of course appropriate in the normative context created by R2P to argue that Syrian officials should indeed be 'held accountable';⁶⁶ and the idea that 'Bashar al-Assad [should] be tried before the International Criminal Court for committing crimes against humanity'⁶⁷ was prominent in US discourse (despite the United States' ambiguous policy towards that institution). The Assad regime was seen as illegitimate and as forfeiting its sovereignty, and it followed from this that its leader should face political and criminal accountability. As Obama explained in June 2013: 'my objective, understand, is Assad leaving because he delegitimized himself by what he did to his people'.⁶⁸

63 Ben Rhodes, 'Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney and Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes', 17 June 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/06/17/press-briefing-press-secretary-jay-carney-and-deputy-national-security-a>, accessed 25 February 2019.

64 Robert Ford, 'Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations – 31 October 2013' (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2013).

65 Barack Obama, 'Joint Press Conference by President Obama and Prime Minister Erdogan of Turkey', 16 May 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/16/joint-press-conference-president-obama-and-prime-minister-erdogan-turkey>, accessed 19 March 2019. Obama also declared: 'I think Assad must go'. Barack Obama, 'Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel in Joint Press Conference', 20 March 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/03/20/remarks-president-obama-and-prime-minister-netanyahu-israel-joint-press->, accessed 19 March 2019.

66 United States House of Representatives, 'Resolution Expressing Support for Peaceful Demonstrations and Universal Freedoms in Syria and Condemning the Human Rights Violations by the Assad Regime', 3 June 2011, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/112th-congress/house-resolution/296/text>, accessed 19 March 2019.

67 United States House of Representatives, 'Resolution Calling for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to be Tried before the International Criminal Court for Committing Crimes against Humanity', 15 June 2012, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/112th-congress/house-resolution/687/text>, accessed 19 March 2019. See also United States Senate, 'Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations – 11 April 2013' (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2013).

68 Matt Compton, 'President Obama Discusses the National Security Agency on Charlie Rose', 18 June 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2013/06/18/president-obama-discusses-national-security-agency-charlie-rose>, accessed 19 March 2019. Kerry adopts a similar position: 'he has shelled universities and killed innocent students sitting at their desks. He shelled schools with napalm and burned innocent children who were there trying to learn. He has bombed and gassed people in his country so that more than

Obama also declared that 'in Syria, the future must not belong to a dictator who massacres his people'.⁶⁹ Likewise, Secretary Clinton insisted the US had 'nothing invested in the continuation of a regime that must kill, imprison and torture its own citizens to maintain power'.⁷⁰

Underpinning this linking of R2P to regime change was a local American predisposition to interpret the crisis in Syria through the lens of the Arab Spring, which itself was interpreted as part of the inexorable movement of history away from authoritarian regimes like Assad's and towards liberalism and democracy. The construction of the situation in Syria as part of a historic force sweeping the Middle East resonated at that time with the Obama administration's attempts to reset US foreign policy after the perceived failures of the Bush administration in that region. This construction also resonated with local values and convictions in a teleological vision of history, thus providing the 'logical' link between R2P and regime change and a specific localisation of R2P.

The inevitability of change was expressed unanimously by the Obama administration.⁷¹ As Obama declared, 'ultimately, this dictator will fall, as dictators in the past have fallen'.⁷² The Assad regime is thus doomed to an 'inevitable collapse'.⁷³ Likewise, Clinton insisted on 'the inevitable fall of Assad' in the same way as her successor Kerry did.⁷⁴ As Clinton bluntly expressed in 2011:

115,000 or so are dead. How can that man claim to rule under any legitimacy in the future?'. John Kerry, 'Remarks with Qatari Foreign Minister Khalid al-Atiyah before Their Meeting', 21 October 2013, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/10/215713.htm>, accessed 19 March 2019.

69 Barack Obama, 'Remarks by the President to the UN General Assembly', 25 September 2012, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/09/25/remarks-president-un-general-assembly>, accessed 25 February 2019.

70 Hillary Clinton, 'Meeting with Syrian Activists', 2 August 2011, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/08/169489.htm>, accessed 19 March 2019.

71 This sense of inevitability is also criticised by some voices: in the Senate, for instance, Senator McCain criticised the dominant view ('Nothing in this world is predetermined, and claims about the inevitability of events can often be a convenient way to abdicate responsibility' in United States Senate, 'Syria', 5 March 2012, <https://www.congress.gov/congressional-record/2012/3/5/senate-section/article/s1377-2?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22syria%22%5D%27D&resultIndex=123>, accessed 19 March 2019).

72 Barack Obama, 'Press Conference by the President', 6 March 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/03/06/press-conference-president>, accessed 19 March 2019.

73 Barack Obama, 'Statement by the President on Syria', 4 February 2012, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/02/04/statement-president-syria>, accessed 25 February 2019.

74 Hillary Clinton, 'Remarks with Foreign Minister Davutoglu after Their Meeting', 11 August 2012, <http://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2012/08/196358.htm>, accessed 19 March 2019. See also Hillary Clinton, "Coffee Break with Hillary Clinton"

'Look, Assad's going to be gone; it's just a question of time'.⁷⁵ Some even went as far as comparing the Assad regime to a 'dead man walking', insisting that the 'real question' was not whether the regime could survive but rather how many steps it could still take.⁷⁶ For Obama, Assad was using 'the repressive tactics of the past'⁷⁷ and 'he and his regime will be left in the past [while] the courageous Syrian people who have demonstrated in the streets will determine its future'.⁷⁸ As the following section demonstrates, this interpretation of the Syria situation as a democratic revolution that was on the right side of history, and therefore destined to succeed, resonated especially well with a sub-discourse of American exceptionalism referred to as 'exemplarism'. In the discursive context it created, the US should not corrupt a 'homegrown revolution' by intervening on its behalf. Rather, it should support that revolution politically and rhetorically by insisting on the overthrow of the regime, which it assumed was inevitable.

3 R2P and American 'Exemplarism'

The Arab Spring narrative and the 'inevitability' of the triumph of democratic revolutions thus enabled US officials to call for regime change without answering the second order questions of how to bring that about; and, because that

Hosted by CNN-Turk and Moderated by Sirin Payzin', 16 July 2011, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/07/168667.htm>, accessed 25 February 2019; and Hillary Clinton, 'Press Availability in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates', 9 June 2011, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/06/165351.htm>, accessed 25 February 2019; John Kerry, 'Remarks with Jordanian Foreign Minister Nasser Judeh after Their Meeting', 17 July 2013, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/07/212075.htm>, accessed 19 March 2019.

75 Hillary Clinton, 'Interview with Norah O'Donnell of CBS News', 18 November 2011, <http://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/11/177370.htm>, accessed 19 March 2019.

76 Special Coordinator for Regional Affairs Hof in United States House of Representatives, 'Hearing before the Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia – 14 December 2011' (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2011).

77 Barack Obama, 'Statement by President Obama on the Situation in Syria', 18 August 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/08/18/statement-president-obama-situation-syria>, accessed 25 February 2019.

78 Barack Obama, 'Statement by the President on the Violence in Syria', 31 July 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/07/31/statement-president-violence-syria>, accessed 25 February 2019. Obama also declared: 'in Syria, I have no doubt that the Assad regime will soon discover that the forces of change cannot be reversed, and that human dignity cannot be denied' (Barack Obama, 'Remarks by the President in State of the Union Address', 24 January 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/01/24/remarks-president-state-union-address>, accessed 25 February 2019).

narrative filtered the way US officials perceived America's responsibility to protect, it enabled them to claim this was properly discharged by calling for political and criminal accountability. Underpinning this approach of course was a reluctance to commit US forces to the conflict, but that 'realist' impulse could only be reconciled with R2P once the norm had been 'localised' by an exceptionalist discourse. This is because the 'exemplarist' sub-discourse of American exceptionalism insists that it was appropriate for the United States to remain on the sidelines of what essentially was an uprising of the Syrian people against the Assad regime. Indeed, because of the dominance of the Arab Spring framing, the vulnerability of the Syrian population to atrocity crimes became fused with this exceptionalist narrative which focused on the ideal of a home-grown and indigenous 'revolution' for liberty that was reminiscent of the history of the US itself.

H. W. Brands captures the 'exemplarist' strand of the American exceptionalist tradition in his book *What America Owes the World*.⁷⁹ This accepts the US role as a vanguard in the march of world history toward democracy, but it claims to fulfil that role by perfecting American institutions at home. Meddling in the affairs of other nations jeopardises the legitimacy of foreign revolution, threatens the institutions that protect US liberty (especially the checks and balances against presidential power), and undermines the example the US constitutional democracy sets other nations. John Quincy Adams – President Monroe's Secretary of State – in his 1823 remarks on the occasion of the revolutions in Latin America, typifies exemplarism, and clearly it resonates with the Obama administration's predisposition on the Syria situation:

Wherever the standard of freedom and independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will her heart, her benedictions, and her prayers be. But she goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own ... She well knows that by once enlisting under other banners than her own, were they even banners of foreign independence, she would involve herself beyond the power of extrication, in all wars of interest and intrigue ... She might become the dictatress of the world. She would no longer be the ruler of her own spirit.⁸⁰

79 Brands, *What America Owes the World*, p. viii. Walter Russell Mead equates this with the 'Jeffersonian' tradition in *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001); see also Walter McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World since 1776* (Boston: Mariner Books, 1998).

80 Quoted in Brands, *What America Owes the World*, pp. 8–9.

This exemplarist approach – the US would support democratic values ‘by living them’ – was evident in Obama’s foreign policy in the years preceding the Syrian crisis. The US would ‘not seek to impose these values through force’;⁸¹ Democracy and individual empowerment, Obama’s first National Security Strategy insisted, ‘need not come at the expense of cherished identities’;⁸² and, as the President told his audience at Cairo University, ‘no system of government can or should be imposed upon one nation by any other’. Each nation, he added, ‘gives life to this principle in its own way, grounded in the traditions of its own people’. But this pluralist sensitivity did not lessen the commitment ‘to governments that reflect the will of the people’ or ‘an unyielding belief that all people yearn for certain things: the ability to speak your mind and have a say in how you are governed’. These the President insisted ‘are not just American ideas, they are human rights, and that is why we will support them everywhere’.⁸³

This particularly American (local) exemplarist tradition became very important in the Syrian case as R2P was interpreted through it. In this localisation of R2P, a key element was the fact that the ultimate responsibility lay with the Syrian ‘people’ (and not with outside actors), which is in contrast to R2P language that talks about protecting ‘populations’, presumably because ‘population’ is apolitical (and thus legitimately humanitarian and universal), in a way that ‘the people’ is not, especially in its associations to American values (for example, ‘we the people’ and ‘a government of, for and by the people’). It was only through their own efforts to liberate themselves that the Syrian ‘people’ could genuinely protect itself from the Syrian regime. As bluntly put by Ford: ‘Ultimately this is a Syrian conflict. It is not an American conflict’.⁸⁴ Obama also confirmed this view when arguing that ‘we’re not putting our troops in the middle of somebody else’s war’⁸⁵ and that ‘we cannot resolve someone else’s civil war through force’.⁸⁶ He explained that:

81 United States, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington: President of the United States, 2010), p. 5.

82 *ibid.*, p. 35.

83 Barack Obama, ‘Speech in Cairo’, 4 June 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/04/us/politics/04obama.text.html>, accessed 10 April 2019.

84 Ford, ‘Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations – 31 October 2013’.

85 Susan Rice, ‘Remarks as Prepared for Delivery by National Security Advisor’, 9 September 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/09/remarks-prepared-delivery-national-security-advisor-susan-e-rice>, accessed 25 February 2019.

86 United States House of Representatives, ‘Mo Brooks of Alabama Voting “No” on Attacking Syria’, 11 September 2013, <https://www.congress.gov/congressional-record/2013/9/11/house-section/article/h5480-1?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22syria%22%5D%27D&resultIndex=305>, accessed 26 February 2019.

It is up to the Syrian people to choose their own leaders, and we have heard their strong desire that there not be foreign intervention in their movement ... It is time for the Syrian people to determine their own destiny, and we will continue to stand firmly on their side.⁸⁷

The emphasis was thus clearly on the responsibility of the Syrian people themselves: 'the ultimate destiny of the Syrian regime and the Syrian people lies with the people themselves'.⁸⁸ As early as November 2011, Secretary Clinton was also distancing the US from the Arab Spring movements: 'These revolutions are not ours. They are not by us, for us, or against us'.⁸⁹ As a result, Syrians 'are going to have to resolve that issue'.⁹⁰ In fact, as Clinton added, 'many of the choices ahead are, honestly, not ours to make'.⁹¹ In essence, then, the Syrian crisis became 'their' – that is, the Syrians' – 'revolution' and responsibility, while an R2P framing would have made Syrian 'vulnerability' a US responsibility.⁹² The exemplarist framing in fact made the Syrian revolution an opportunity and reduced US responsibilities in ways that could be discharged through a rhetorical rather than material commitment.

87 Barack Obama, 'Statement by President Obama on the Situation in Syria', 18 August 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/08/18/statement-president-obama-situation-syria>, accessed 25 February 2019.

88 Hillary Clinton, 'Remarks on Libya and Syria', 15 July 2011, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/07/168656.htm>, accessed 25 February 2019. See similar expressions in Hillary Clinton, 'Press Availability in Istanbul', 15 July 2011, <http://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/07/168625.htm>, accessed 19 March 2019; and Hillary Clinton, 'Remarks on the Situation in Syria', 18 August 2011, <http://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/08/170673.htm>, accessed 19 March 2019.

89 Hillary Clinton, 'Keynote Address at the National Democratic Institute's 2011 Democracy Awards Dinner', 7 November 2011, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/11/176750.htm>, accessed 25 February 2019. In the same speech Clinton nevertheless adds that 'we do have a role. We have the resources, capabilities, and expertise to support those who seek peaceful, meaningful, democratic reform. And with so much that can go wrong, and so much that can go right, support for emerging Arab democracies is an investment we cannot afford not to make'.

90 United States Senate, 'Authorizing the Limited and Specified Use of the United States Armed Forces Against Syria – Motion to Proceed', 10 September 2013, <https://www.congress.gov/congressional-record/2013/9/10/senate-section/article/s6312-2?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22syria%22%5D%7D&resultIndex=349>, accessed 26 February 2019.

91 Clinton, 'Keynote Address at the National Democratic Institute's 2011 Democracy Awards Dinner'.

92 For more on the potential for democracy promotion and atrocity prevention to clash in practice when they are clearly aligned in theory see Staunton and Ralph, 'The Responsibility to Protect Norm Cluster'.

It might be argued that the exemplarist tradition was present in the Obama administration's thinking prior to the Syrian crisis, which of course saw the United States militarily intervene to protect the Libyan population by overthrowing the Ghaddafi regime. This begs the question of why this localised version of R2P, which we argue was behind non-intervention in Syria, led to a very different policy in Libya. Two points can be made in response. First, there was an understanding, often expressed in official discourse, that the Syria situation was different to the Libyan one;⁹³ and second, even in the Libyan situation, US policy drew on the exemplarist position to justify the decision not to put 'boots on the ground'. This failure to intervene, especially with respect to Syria, raised a different realist concern, one that lamented the mismatch in policy ends and means. But again, by viewing the situation through the prism of the Arab Spring and the progress of history, and by framing US responsibility in terms of the exemplarist tradition, US policymakers were able to claim they were acting appropriately, despite the ends/means mismatch and despite the manifest failure to protect.

Of course, the discursive trope that 'Syria is not Libya' implied that 'Syria' was potentially another 'Iraq' for the US; the ghost of which is evident in the following exchange between Congressman Collins and Secretary of State Kerry on the Syria situation:

Mr. COLLINS. ... it goes back to the saying of a former Secretary, that if we break it, we own it. ...

Secretary KERRY. We didn't break it.

Mr. COLLINS. I understand.

Secretary KERRY. It is broken.⁹⁴

This invoked the famous 'pottery barn' rule – you break it you fix it – which President George W. Bush's Secretary of State Colin Powell cited before the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. Powell's point was that responsibility to protect (or in that instance protect *and* rebuild) can flow from culpability as well as capability.⁹⁵ As the Syrian situation was, as far as the US political elite was

93 Ralph, Holland and Zhekova, 'Before the Vote'.

94 United States House of Representatives, 'Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Affairs – 4 September 2013' (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2013).

95 Jason Ralph and Jason Souter, 'A Special Responsibility to Protect: The UK, Australia and the Rise of Islamic State', *International Affairs*, 91/4: 709–723 (2015).

concerned, a homegrown revolution that the US was not implicated in, it was right to remain on the sidelines. As argued in the Senate, for instance: 'At the end of the day, it is up to the Syrians, through a political process, to determine their own government'.⁹⁶

Our argument then is that the US official discourse constructed its responsibility to protect the Syrian population in a way that grafted it on to the traditional ways of thinking and speaking that are deeply embedded in American culture. That discourse then refracted the situation as a 'democratic revolution' that the US should support by calling for regime change while remaining on the sidelines of the conflict that ensued. Vulnerable populations would be protected once the Assad regime was replaced and held accountable for its crimes; and that would not take long, and the costs would be limited, because the lens also portrayed the Assad regime as doomed. This then is how a particular predisposition, which we identify as American exemplarism, helped to localise R2P. But it was far from being the only option on the table, and R2P could have been localised differently.

Indeed, calls for intervention were regularly heard in the legislative branch and in the press.⁹⁷ These calls for action were linked to the identity of the US itself as a vanguard state: as put by Congressman Fortenberry: 'The United States is not going to stand by idly and watch this kind of brutality. It is not who we are'.⁹⁸ Or as Congressman Ackerman expressed it: 'We can't just be sitting here while these people are being slaughtered and maimed ... It is unfair. It is

96 United States Senate, 'Authorizing the Limited and Specified Use of the United States Armed Forces Against Syria – Motion to Proceed', 10 September 2013. See similar expressions in United States House of Representatives, 'Hearing before the Sub-Committee on the Middle East and South Asia of the Committee on Foreign Affairs House of Representatives – 27 July 2011' (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2011); Jay Carney, 'Statement by the Press Secretary on Syria', 7 June 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/06/07/statement-press-secretary-syria>, accessed 7 October 2019.

97 We exclude here the specific calls made for a military intervention as a response to the chemical weapons use of August 2013. The interested readers will find several of these calls in United States House of Representatives, 'Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Affairs – 4 September 2013' (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2013); John Kerry, 'Statement on Syria', 30 August 2013, <http://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/08/213668.htm>, accessed 19 March 2019; and Barack Obama, 'Statement by the President on Syria', 31 August 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/08/31/statement-president-syria>, accessed 19 March 2019.

98 United States House of Representatives, 'Hearing before the Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia – 25 April 2012' (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2012).

inhumane. It is unworthy of us as a society'.⁹⁹ The Syrian situation became a 'moral imperative': 'we and all other responsible nations have a moral imperative to ensure that Bashar al-Assad is removed from power as soon as possible'.¹⁰⁰

Yet even here it is interesting to note that the moral imperative to protect the Syrian people from inhumane action also translated into the removal of the Assad regime and illustrates again the localisation of R2P so that it could be grafted on to an American predisposition to support democratic revolutions. Arguably this 'vindicationist' approach,¹⁰¹ whereby America would match the ends of regime change with the material means of bringing it about through military intervention, was more responsible than the 'exemplarist' approach that encouraged the revolutionaries while doing nothing to protect the population. Yet that was not the position of the administration, at least in this early period of the conflict.

4 Conclusion

In this article we have examined the US response to the early Syria crisis, examining how it was framed in official discourse. We found that the situation was interpreted as a humanitarian crisis that triggered international society's responsibility to protect, but that this was not the only significant framing. 'Syria' was also understood in the context of the Arab Spring, and a discourse that put democratic movements on 'the right side of history' forecast the inevitable downfall of regimes like Assad's without US intervention. This enabled US officials to reconstruct a national identity that was committed to democratic change while being sensitive to the harm that US power could cause. The US approach to discharging its responsibility to protect, in other words, was localised in the sense that the humanitarian crisis was refracted through a lens that resonated strongly with America's own identity as a state that is exceptional because of its position in the history of democratic revolutions. This meant President Obama, despite his professed Realism, was disinclined or unable to do anything other than call on Assad to go, even when in 2012 the

99 Michael H. Posner, 'Hearing before the Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia – 27 July 2011' (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2011).

100 Hillary Clinton, 'Remarks at the Ad Hoc Ministerial Meeting on Syria', 19 April 2012, <http://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2012/04/188147.htm>, accessed 19 March 2019.

101 Brands, *What America Owes the World*.

United Nations saw that as an obstacle to a kind of peace that would mitigate the vulnerability of Syria's populations.¹⁰²

There is a normative implication that flows from this. When confronted by a humanitarian crisis and thinking how best to discharge their responsibility to protect, officials need to keep in focus that the R2P norm demands first and foremost the protection of vulnerable populations, and they should examine how their own national or 'local' beliefs, identities, traditions, practices, cognitive priors or normative context may cloud the processes of practical reasoning that are necessary to do that effectively. In this instance, we conclude, the American exceptionalist – especially exemplarist – faith in the movement of history left vulnerable populations unprotected, and while the call that Assad's regime should be held politically and criminally responsible for atrocities was appropriate in the broad normative context created by R2P, that was of no practical help to those vulnerable populations on the ground.

The point here is not that US officials were reinterpreting R2P. What R2P means in and for practice is indeterminate. That is defined on a case-by-case basis and there was no prior prescription as to how to respond that the United States could *re*interpret. Neither is the point that this form of localisation is part of a 'feedback loop',¹⁰³ which seeks to contest and reconstruct a 'global' norm. This was a response to a specific case and not part of a targeted campaign to reinterpret R2P. The point instead is that US officials were predisposed to a definition of R2P that insisted on political and criminal accountability (in effect regime change) as that was easier to 'graft' on to 'local' discourses or beliefs, identities, traditions, practices of American exceptionalism, especially the exemplarist perception of the US role in promoting global democracy.

There is nothing wrong with that interpretation of R2P, until one places it in the political context of the moment, which meant the Assad regime was *not* going to fall without external assistance and US exemplarism ruled that out. The alternative approach to protecting Syrian populations in this context was a UN-sponsored peace but that was only possible if Western governments stopped prejudging the outcome of political transition in their calls for regime change and US exemplarism ruled that out too. To the extent therefore that the US localised definition of R2P required regime change, to the extent that definition denied the means of delivering that, and to the extent that definition

102 Jason Ralph, 'What Should Be Done? Pragmatic Constructivist Ethics and the Responsibility to Protect', *International Organization*, 72/1: 191–196 (2018).

103 Prantl and Nakano, 'Global Norm Diffusion in East Asia'.

was an obstacle to alternative processes of protection, localisation theory can help explain R2P's failure in Syria.

Acknowledgements

Research for this paper was funded by the Research Councils UK (RCUK) cross-council research programme, "Rights and Ethics in a Security Context" grant number ES/L013355/1. Professor Ralph was Principal Investigator.