

Handwritten notes in a cursive script, mostly illegible due to blurring and fading. The text appears to be organized into several paragraphs, with some lines starting with a small mark that could be a bullet point or a section indicator.

▶ Oracle Against Damascus

Stephen A. Wynne ▶

June 13, 2013.

From the BBC: *At least 93,000 people have been killed in Syria since the start of the conflict, according to latest United Nations figures. This represents a rise of more than 30,000 since the UN last issued figures covering the period to November 2012. At least 5,000 people have been dying in Syria every month since last July, the UN's human rights body says. But it says these statistics are an underestimate as it believes many deaths have not been reported...the UN's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) says it has also documented the deaths of more than 1,700 children under the age of 10. There were "cases of individual children being tortured and executed, and entire families, including babies, being massacred—which, along with this devastatingly high death toll, is a terrible reminder of just how vicious this conflict has become," said OHCHR head Navi Pillay...The study said government forces and rebels were using boys and girls as "suicide bombers or human shields." Children in Syria were suffering "maybe the heaviest toll" of anywhere in the world, said UN special representative Leila Zerrougui, who presented the findings. "They are killed, they are maimed, they are recruited, they are detained, they are tortured," she told journalists in New York.¹*

June 13, 2013 was just another day.

In New York, a number of diplomats began their morning by convening within the chambers of the United Nations to discuss the crisis. Some, acting upon orders from their respective capitals, remained steadfast against intervention. Denying their responsibility to protect, they chose once again to abandon the people of Syria to the monsters warring in their midst. Others continued to struggle against their colleagues' intransigence, pushing for some form of intervention. These efforts were supported by myriad NGOs, whose representatives paced UN corridors to petition—some for coercive action against the al-Assad regime, others for more basic protection of the people. Despite the gravity of the ongoing debate, the air seemed quiet, for there were no concussions, no screams to fill it.

In Syria, the sun rose and shed its light, but it was unable to dispel the infesting darkness. Inside his fortress, buttressed by *raison d'État*, the young despot of Damascus prepared to pass another day in power. Outside, faction after faction took up arms, with the militias invoking God, and the army saluting the state. Between them were millions of innocents—Sunni and Shiite, Alawite, Christian, and Jew. Throughout the course of the day, hundreds fell in the crossfire. Homes were invaded. Property was seized. Citizens were made refugees. Families were robbed and rent asunder. By day's end, more than 150 Syrians had been murdered by their countrymen. Countless others were made to suffer a satanic campaign of rape and torture. All this in a day. *One day—June 13, 2013.*

Syria today is the scene of *a mysterium tremendum, an utter mystery to the rational mind—a mystery that carries with it not only the aspect of vastness, but the resonance of terror, something so unutterably diabolic as to be literally unknowable to us.*² Indeed, *atrocitiy* is too clinical, too clean a term to encapsulate the scope of the deeds being perpetrated on the ground there. In fact, I would argue that the horror unfolding in Syria is beyond the descriptive capacity of the language of reason. To properly

convey its desolation and repugnance, the patois of theology is required. To fully capture this vastness, to plumb these deeds in their depths, I can only employ a term not found in diplomatic parlance: *sin*.

On both sides of the political divide, untold numbers have debased themselves so completely as to fundamentally diminish their humanity. In committing abomination after abomination, they have destroyed their own consciences; they have become sociopathic and machine-like, inciting sorrow so that the fires of their hatred may be fed. And their currency is *sin*: Rape of women. Butchering of children. Gouging of eyes. Slow beheading of captives. Torture of wounded within hospitals. Consumption of human flesh. Kidnapping. Child soldiers. Mass graves. Sarin. These are the fruits of their labor, and each is an abrogation of empathy, a deification of the self, a transgression against deeper law. *Sin*.

For more than two years, a ravenous, crimson *sin* has saturated Syria, yet beyond its borders the international community has failed to rally. Syria must now be added to the litany of lands in which the worst of the worst was allowed to unfold; it joins Germany, Cambodia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Rwanda, and Darfur as a site where slaughter was unmet by sufficient opposition. In the end, perhaps years from now, after the regime is finished and the UN has returned to begin the work of rebuilding, academics will fill texts and journals with reflective articles on what should have happened in Syria, what could have been done, how things might have been different “if only...” Yet these will come too late to assuage this generation’s suffering.

Clearly, something has gone awry—and not only in Damascus, but in New York, as well. Following triumphs in Kenya and Libya, the responsibility to protect (R2P) seemed to be ascendant; yet, it has failed utterly to stem the violence in Syria. And why? It seems that the Security Council is hesitant to act decisively on Syria because, during its implementation amid the Libyan crisis, R2P proved *too* adaptive in its morphology:

The most severe criticism of the Libyan case has concerned the allegation of “mission creep”...Russia, China, India and Brazil all objected strongly to the alteration of NATO’s military stance from the relative neutrality of civilian protection to evident partiality in taking the rebel side...Secondly, forceful opposition was expressed towards the shift from civilian protection to the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime...the action of the coalition forces appeared to take the intervention...beyond what the *UN Charter* could be interpreted to allow. Even the most ardent international advocates of R2P have acknowledged that the mandate was stretched to the breaking point and maybe beyond it.³

In other words, R2P’s current immobility is an outgrowth of intrigue. A phenomenon rooted in fear. Fear of Western—and particularly, American—expansionism. Fear of a general undermining of state sovereignty norms. Such fears are neither insignificant, nor necessarily unwarranted; but do they justify ongoing inaction? I argue, *No*.

Sadly, I have no specific policy recommendation to make here, as I am as vexed by this crisis as the more seasoned scholars of international relations. What I do know is this: Al-Assad is recording his legacy in the blood of Syria's children, and he must answer for this. Likewise, among his opponents, so must those who have fomented their own strains of *sin*. The international community must overcome its impasse and unite quickly to forge this horror's final chapter. In the process, R2P must be refitted, streamlined, and strengthened.

More broadly, it seems to me desirable that in the years ahead, we exchange a measure of Machiavelli for one of Augustine—that we choose to focus not merely on what we as a species do, here and now, but on what we as a civilization *ought* to do—here, and now, and across future generations. Idealistic though this may be, I contend that we would do well to resurrect the primacy of ought,⁴ to reincorporate it into our paradigm. In so doing, our collective gaze would be lifted, and take in not only the actual, but also the good, the transcendent. A global recognition that our ultimate duty is to something higher and yet deeper than the state would utterly transform the practice of diplomacy. And with this, perhaps, we could at last bind the hands of Cain, long before any stone is first grasped.

Until then, let us remember Syria.

A graduate student and an administrator at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri, USA, Stephen Wynne is interested in international relations, humanitarianism, and human rights. He volunteers as a refugee settlement specialist, and has supported the work of the Institute for Cultural Diplomacy since 2011.

Notes

¹ BBC News. *Syria death toll at least 93,000, says UN*. 13. June 2013.

² David Kupelian. *Innocent Blood*. 20. January 2005.

³ Spencer Zifcak. *The Responsibility to Protect After Libya and Syria*. 2012

⁴ James V. Schall, S.J. *What is Medieval Political Philosophy?* Taken from www.ewtn.com.