

# Should We Support International Military Intervention to Prevent Oppression?

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## **Abstract**

This essay identifies and analyses the prevailing arguments for and against humanitarian intervention and considers the conditions under which it should be supported to prevent oppression. First, it considers the limitations of the definition and uses Jefferson McMahan's review. Secondly, it recognises that the debate often revolves around the issue of self-determination of states and examines Michael Walzer's non-intervention arguments. Thirdly, it highlights some of the trade-offs of intervention between the ideals of modern Western democracy and the importance of self-determination. And finally, it analyses the most prevailing arguments through which intervention can be justified. Additionally, it looks at international intervention from a moral perspective.

**Keywords:** global justice, human rights, political theory, humanitarian intervention, international military intervention

## **Introduction**

The interconnectedness of the current international sphere renders foreign influence inescapable. In the history of the US, the country has intervened militarily almost 400 times (Kushi & Toft, 2023). There have been many successful interventions in the history of international relations, however, there have also been many failings due to both non-intervention and the aftermath of it. The moral aspect of humanitarian intervention has been debated by many, arguably, the most influential work on humanitarian intervention was developed by M. Walzer, to which I refer to much throughout this essay. He is heavily criticized by McMahan, who offers more context around many of Walzer's

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arguments. Additionally, I mention the works of A. Buchanan and Luban, who bring up different aspects of humanitarian intervention.

### **Defining intervention**

McMahan defines international humanitarian intervention as “simply coercive external interference in the affairs of a population organized in the form of a state” (McMahan, 1987, p. 78). In contrast to other definitions commonly used at the time, McMahan’s characterization averts controversy. Firstly, it is presumed by some authors that an intervention must be military or at least threaten to use military force (Vincent, 1974, p.8; Roberts, 1993, p.429). However, McMahan argues that the case of U.S. intervention in Chile in 1973, which was successful without using military means, is an exemplary case of intervention. Thus, even covert interference without the presence of military force should be considered an intervention. Secondly, it is proposed by others that either the agent or the target of intervention should be restricted to a state (Wicclair, 1979, pp.142-144). McMahan argues that there is no justification for this requirement, the main issue being that it associates “the state” with the government, rather than the people who are being oppressed by it. Additionally, this characterization would exclude many international organizations from intervening. Thirdly, the restrictions on the aim of coercion, he argues, are just as arbitrary. These restrictions put on the definition of humanitarian intervention, e.g., “restrictions on the mode of coercion, restrictions on either the agent or the target of the coercion, and restrictions on the aim of the coercion” seem to be put in place to accommodate the view that intervention is not justifiable. McMahan’s formulated definition is the least restrictive one, thus allowing to look at humanitarian intervention from a broader perspective (McMahan, 1987, p. 76).

### **The trade-offs of intervention**

In the literature on humanitarian intervention, much of the debate is focused on the idea that an intervention by a foreign state is an infringement on the basic right to self-determination: “Humanitarian intervention is often defined as infringement of a state's sovereignty by an external agent or agents for the sake of preventing human rights violations” (Buchanan, 1999, p.1).

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Walzer's essay *The Moral Standing of States: A Response to Four Critics* extensively discusses the importance of self-determination and state sovereignty, which are arguments most commonly mentioned against intervention (1980). His main reasoning is that every state has a historic community, and the international domain should respect the union of a state and its people. His theory is based on the premise that a state's right to self-determination is the sole reason why foreign military intervention would constitute an attack: "For as long as substantial numbers of citizens believe themselves bound and are prepared, for whatever reasons, to fight, an attack upon their state would constitute aggression" (Walzer, 1980, p. 213). He argues that political communities have a right to self-determination, which in most cases should not be violated, even if their government is oppressive. Walzer views an intervention in terms of invasion, which oppresses the rights of subjects and citizens by artificially speeding up the process of their self-determination. Therefore, the result of the intervention could be considered 'artificial' and not representative of the political community's natural way of evolving (Walzer, 1980, p. 214).

McMahan challenges his view, arguing that the benefit of the political community's right to self-determination should be weighed against the consequences of that community's self-determination in the case of non-intervention. McMahan states that helping a group's efforts at self-determination should not be seen as an attack on their rights, because "the right to self-determination does not encompass a component right to persecute, expel, or massacre innocent members of another group. Such acts are not protected by any right" (McMahan, 2010, p. 48). McMahan's argument is that the refusal to offer the community a choice would mean disrespecting their right to self-determination.

The presented dilemma then between Walzer's and McMahan's arguments is that both intervention and non-intervention can be considered as an infringement on the rights of the political community. The question then, I argue, should concern the wants of that political community, which in most cases can be difficult to determine, especially in particularly divided societies. Consequently, the issue essentially comes down to having to make a trade-off between the ideals of modern Western democracy and the importance of self-determination even in states that do not meet these ideals. McMahan defines communal self-determination as a democratic association where the subjects of the community are responsible for its affairs. The issue, however, is that often it can be unclear, especially from the outside perspective, to definitively tell if a community is self-determining. Moreover, for international actors, it can be problematic to determine which

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communities' self-determination should be respected and what that respect requires (McMahan,1987).

### **The right to self-determination**

The right to self-determination of a state is based on the state's legitimacy, which is granted by the people. In this case, it would follow that a democratic state has a right to non-intervention (McMahan, 1987, p. 84). Furthermore, McMahan points out two criteria that make a state legitimate - the state must work for and on behalf of its subjects and it must operate with the general approval and acceptance (McMahan,1987). The previously mentioned work of Walzer expresses a similar idea, he talks about the "fit" between the government and the community – outsiders are "not to intervene unless the absence of 'fit' between the government and community is radically apparent" (Walzer,1980, p. 214).

In cases where it cannot be determined if a state is legitimate, McMahan prompts us to weigh out and take into consideration aspects such as the overall level of violence and the cause for social justice. I argue that these criteria leave some room for a government to be considered legitimate, yet still oppressive by nature. Most authoritarian governments throughout history have believed to work for and on behalf of some or even all their subjects, when in reality the disconnect between the government and the people was extreme. Additionally, it is quite possible to win the general approval and acceptance to persecute a subgroup of the society. As a present-day example, I would mention the oppression of Kurds in Turkey and Uyghur Muslims in China, however, the examples that can be given are countless. Therefore, I argue that a state's presumed legitimacy should not be considered the only determining factor whether a humanitarian intervention is required or not.

### **Discussion on the conditions for intervention**

The following section examines and combines conditions for intervention offered by the relevant authors and argues why critiques of these conditions do not consider the wider context of humanitarian help. Walzer describes three conditions under which intervention is justifiable, the first of which is if it is to aid national liberation struggles in a multinational state. Once again,

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returning to the importance of the 'fit' between the government and its people, intervention may be justified when the rebellion has reached a certain threshold such that the state can no longer claim to be legitimate (Walzer, 1980, p. 217). Second, Walzer justifies counter-intervention even when the original intervention might not have been justifiable. For example, in a civil war, when a foreign state has joined one of the sides, another state's intervention is justified. I argue that even in these circumstances, a state is morally obligated to weigh out whether a counter-intervention can help the citizens' efforts. Third, an intervention is permissible if a state massacres or enslaves its own citizens or subjects or expels very large numbers of people. This Walzer's condition is straightforward and has been the justification for many humanitarian interventions.

Another aspect worth noting in intervention is the consideration of selfless intentions emphasized by Buchanan (1999). It "must be purely humanitarian in intent, that the sole or at least the primary goal of the intervention must be to protect the welfare and freedom of those in another state, rather than some advantage to the intervening state or its citizens" (Buchanan, 1999, p. 1). Indeed, the intentions of intervention must be considered, however, I argue that the expectation of state leaders to intervene purely out of their altruism is unrealistic. Given the huge costs of military humanitarian interventions, both financial and political, I believe in most cases there must be a certain level of self-interest. I would also like to add that self-interest and humanitarian intentions do not have to be mutually exclusive. One can help others, while still maintaining a selfish interest in the outcome.

I am most convinced by McMahan's conditions because he calls us to consider levels of violence and the cause of social justice, for him, an intervention is required in cases of attempted secession and when it is called for by the population. Furthermore, an intervention is the only possible way to "stop the persecution or repression of a group or community by their government" (McMahan, 1987, p. 95).

This argument is substantiated by others that especially in the cases of requested help, humanitarian intervention should be seen as an obligation for the outsiders to help victims of grievous injustice. This is a moral obligation that upholds global human rights principles (Tesón, 2009). An article by D. Luban *The Romance of the Nation-State* considers intervention from this moral aspect. Luban argues that modern nationalism has lost the respect for people, focusing on a 'romanticized' version of a nation-state instead. Luban points out that Walzer's theory has ignored "the threat physical

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repression poses to political processes” (Luban,1980, p. 394) and suggests that human rights, in essence, are meant to put limits on political pluralism. This consideration of political pluralism can be discussed through the work of W. Connolly, who argues that pluralism offers a way of looking for new solutions and remaining open to different virtues (Iverson,2006). This stance is quite different from that of Walzer, which treats the issue of self-determination as a fixed entity.

In the realist literature on humanitarian intervention, another critique of intervention that is often stressed is that state leaders have a stronger, fiduciary obligation to their own citizens, which overrides any other moral commitments. This, realists argue, does not mean that the leaders are ruthless, rather they are operating on higher moral grounds. However, Buchanan criticizes this view by mentioning that “fiduciary obligations are not absolute”, state leaders do not need to violate human rights. In fact, there often are times when a leader does not need to choose between the survival of the state’s citizens and ignoring moral obligations. Simply put, not all interventions would put the survival of the state at risk (Buchanan,1999, p. 9). I would add to Buchanan’s argument that the interconnectedness of the current international environment shows that upkeeping human rights in other states can be and is, at times, in the best interest of political communities and humanity in general.

There is yet another argument presented against specifically military humanitarian intervention, which consists of two related points. Firstly, that intervention is likely to escalate and turn into a wider war, and secondly, again, that it undermines the “existence of a plurality of sovereign states” therefore making the international system unstable. McMahan counters the first point by saying that the worst-case scenario should not cancel out the possibility of a successful intervention. Additionally, the consequences of non-intervention in some cases might be worse than the intervention itself. For the second argument, he points out that “states have intervened regularly in one another’s affairs since the doctrine of state sovereignty was first enunciated, yet the system of sovereign states has yet to show any signs of strain” (McMahan,1987, p. 93). To draw back on the more overarching political plurality argument, I add onto McMahan’s point that the exposure of different political systems to one another only gives more freedom to the society to choose the most suitable one.

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## Conditions for justifying intervention

Firstly, and most importantly, I agree with McMahan's arguments, because the perspective they offer comes from humanitarian considerations, rather than considerations of state systems. I am referring to the fact that McMahan considers conditions such as the level of oppression and social injustice, as well as if the help is requested, whereas Walzer considers the preservation of the state, which in my opinion should be a secondary concern. Walzer's crucial point is that a foreign state has no moral right to intervene in the decision-making of citizens of another state. In response to this argument, I point out that since Walzer's article was published, globalization has spread democratic ideals even further. However, Walzer's argument should not be disregarded but rather included in the discussion of every case for intervention. Moreover, I believe that the preservation of the rights of political communities can be done while simultaneously preserving the individuals' rights to life, freedom of speech and a representative government. Intervention is meant to preserve the self-determination of people, not take it away. When politics are placed above morals, the "common humanity of all of us is stained" (Luban, 1980, p. 397).

## Conclusion

This essay has emphasized conditions under which international intervention is permissible. It has become apparent that in the cases of massacre, extreme repression, struggles for national liberation, the expulsion of large numbers of people and enslavement, all prevalent authors would support an intervention. I would like to point out that international military intervention should be supported if it can help reduce the overall level of violence and aid in achieving social justice. Therefore, I would argue that in the case of military intervention, the international society should be more focused on how to accurately weigh out the specific circumstances of each case, rather than choosing non-intervention in fear of failure.

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