

## How the 'Friends of Syria' meeting showcases international weakness

**The intervention in Libya had some experts declaring that henceforth there would be no retreat from an international 'responsibility to protect' civilians. But the Syria crisis has many reassessing the doctrine's stature.**

By [Howard LaFranchi](#), Staff writer / February 23, 2012



In this citizen journalism image provided on Wednesday by the Local Coordination Committees in Syria and accessed on Thursday, anti-Syrian regime protesters hold up Kurdish flags with a fleet of cars during a rally in the northeastern town of Qamishli, Syria. More than 70 countries have been invited to Friday's 'Friends of Syria' meeting in Tunis on Friday.

Local Coordination Committees in Syria/AP

### Washington

As the “Friends of [Syria](#)” group of countries prepares for its inaugural meeting Friday, the largely toothless proposals from the US and other participants for aiding Syria’s besieged civilians are raising questions about the international community’s role.



Syrian National Council member Bassma Kodmadi addresses reporters, during a press conference held in Paris, Wednesday. More than 70 countries have been invited to Friday's 'Friends of Syria' meeting in Tunis on Friday.

Thibault Camus/AP

The [United States](#) is talking about pressuring [President Bashar al-Assad](#) into opening Syria to humanitarian aid – a strategy that has been tried by the [Arab League](#) and the [United Nations Human Rights Council](#) and has failed. Some European countries speak of “shaming” [Russia](#) into dropping its opposition – as expressed in its [Security Council](#) veto earlier month – to international action on Syria.

The international intervention in [Libya](#) last year had some experts declaring that henceforth there would be no retreat from an international “responsibility to protect” civilians. In September, [UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon](#) said the principle, adopted by the [UN General Assembly](#) in 2005, had advanced "from crawling to walking to running" in less than a decade.

But the Syria crisis has many reassessing the doctrine’s stature in international affairs.

“If Libya showed us how far we’ve come, then Syria has shown us how far we have to go” in establishing this principle, says Simon Adams, executive director of the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect in New York.

Friday’s meeting in [Tunis, Tunisia](#), will focus on humanitarian aid and on ways to help the disjointed Syrian opposition form a united and democratic alternative to the Assad regime, officials close to the conference plans say.

But the chances of anything meaningful happening are remote as long as the international community remains divided, some say.

“People are getting a bit dreamy about what is going to be possible and how quickly things are going to be able to happen as a result of the Tunis meeting,” Mr. Adams says. “I don’t know why anyone would think Assad is suddenly going to open the country to international involvement, when he has resisted that so far.”

But the US insists that one of three “pillars” of action for the Tunis meeting will be a firm message to Mr. Assad of his “responsibility” to allow international humanitarian organizations access into Syria.

“What we want to have come out [Friday] is a strong international, unified position on this that sends a strong message to the Syrian regime that they are the ones that have a responsibility to allow this access in,” a senior [State Department](#) official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Thursday en route to Tunis.

The other two “pillars,” the official says, are developing the path to a political transition in Syria – in part through helping the opposition Syrian National Council get organized – and reinforcing the sanctions that many countries have already imposed.

But even some countries that are at the forefront of the international effort behind Friday’s meeting say that in reality, little meaningful action is likely to happen until the international community overcomes its deep divide over Syria. Both Russia and [China](#) vetoed Security Council action.

The key to effective humanitarian action in Syria will be getting back to the [UN](#) in [New York](#), says one senior European diplomat in [Washington](#), also speaking on condition of anonymity. “We do support the principle of a responsibility to protect, but it has to stand on international legitimacy, and that means getting a Security Council resolution behind it.”

And the key to Security Council action will be finding a formula that is acceptable to a very wary Russia. Having a large turnout in Tunis Friday will be one important step in getting Russia to “yes,” the European diplomat adds.

A large showing by Arab and regional representatives will help convince Russia that “what it is doing or not doing in New York is weakening [its] relations with the Arab world,” the European official says.

The diplomat says that European officials who have met recently with Russian counterparts are sensing that Russia is looking for a way to emerge from the isolation it has felt since vetoing the Syria resolution. A recent signal from Russia that it would support Security Council action on a UN humanitarian envoy to Syria is a start, the official says.

“We see that as a slight move that could advance the dynamic for humanitarian action,” the official says.