

On Satellites, Human Rights and Syria

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As Homs was being demolished by artillery last week, the United Nations announced the appointment of its former Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, as Special Envoy to Syria. At a time when much of the media was debating military intervention and arming the Syrian rebels, his appointment brought some diplomatic balance to discussions. But it also caused some partisans to question whether the UN is out of touch with Syrian reality.

When asked about the need to reform the UN, Kofi Annan used to joke that he thought an extra seat should be created on the Security Council for CNN. During the 1990s the rise of 24-hour satellite news gave CNN immense influence. Terrible images broadcast on the network were deemed responsible for getting America out of the UN peacekeeping mission in Somalia and later dragging it into the conflict in Bosnia. Academics declared the age of "the CNN effect."

Like Annan, former US Secretary of State Madeline Albright worried that political opinion so easily shaped by satellite news might not be a good thing. Others argued that the fact that the Rwanda genocide never made it onto Western television screens was the reason why there was never pressure for comprehensive UN action to halt the slaughter. The world wasn't a spectator to the genocide. It didn't bother tuning in.

CNN's power was always exaggerated and its predominance is now challenged by Al Jazeera and others. But with fresh technological shifts underway and the ongoing need for UN reform, perhaps the question these days is whether a new Security Council seat should go to Facebook or Twitter?

Social media is widely credited with playing a crucial role in the Arab Spring, providing a space for a new generation of Arab activists to foment rebellion. Claims that Egypt was "the Twitter revolution" are hyperbolic, but not completely unfounded. But they also point to something profound about the way we misunderstand the relationship between technology and history. As Malcolm Gladwell has argued, although Facebook and Twitter were tools of the Arab Spring, we shouldn't confuse functionality and causality.

Which is not to say that we can't harness new technology to advance human rights. George Clooney has spent millions of his own activist/actor dollars funding "Satellite Sentinel" -- a project that obtains digital photographs of crimes against humanity in Sudan. In a part of the world where free media are denied access, Satellite Sentinel provides forensic images of the Sudanese army burning villages in Abyei, or firing artillery near fleeing refugees in South Kordofan. The evidence is online for all the world to see.

In a similar vein, last month two leading anti-genocide advocates published an op-ed in the *New York Times* entitled "[Drones for human rights](#)." The authors argued that drones, best known for their work in picking off Al-Qaeda militants in Pakistan for the US military, could be deployed

to record government violence in Syria with "unprecedented precision and scope." The drones would be privately owned and unarmed.

Someone in Washington had a similar idea. The Pentagon is now [reportedly](#) flying drones over Syria to accumulate evidence of the al-Assad government's crimes. Some satellite images of the destruction of Homs have also been published on the Facebook page of the US Embassy in Damascus. This is a form of spycraft I could definitely support.

In London meanwhile the PAX Project is seeking to integrate new cellphone "crowdsourcing" and satellite technologies. Working with software developers Ushahidi and others (including early support from Google), PAX seeks to create "the ideal of open source intelligence" in the hands of NGOs who can use it to mobilize international responses.

But technology can be utilized by all sides in a cyber-conflict. Every week my organization gets sent unverifiable but thoroughly horrifying footage of atrocities in Syria. I have watched videos on my computer of civilians pulped by tanks and artillery. Or cut down in the streets by homicidal troops. But protestors aren't the only one's with smart phones. You can also see smiling soldiers casually filming themselves as they fire into residential neighborhoods. The Syrian crisis has created an iPhone atrocity media, filmed by both perpetrators and victims and uploaded to YouTube.

The Syrian regime has now reportedly [banned](#) iPhones. It has also [developed](#) malware to hack into oppositionist's computers. Stealing the web identities of detained activists has allowed the security forces to entrap and eliminate others. Investigations have even revealed a specific Trojan horse virus that steals private information, including financial details, from Syrian dissidents and sends it to a government administered IP address. For Syrians, Big Brother isn't just watching, he's downloaded everything you don't want him to know about you.

Technology is never neutral. It can be deployed for good or evil. What the current fascination with atrocity drones, human rights satellites and iPhones belies is the fact that in Syria today we don't need more harrowing images. We know what is happening and we know who is responsible. But there are no quick military fixes or technological shortcuts. Universal political will is something much harder to download. Kofi Annan's appointment as Special Envoy still offers the best opportunity we have for a renewed diplomatic surge aimed at ending crimes against humanity in Syria.

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