

How shall people of faith consider a possible U.S. intervention in Syria?

Some notes and resources by Andover Newton Assistant Professor of Christian Ethics, [M.T. Dávila](#)
August 30, 2013

The current war in Syria, which has already [claimed more than 100,000 lives](#) and produced more than [2 million refugees, half of them children](#), delivered a horrific set of images last week after a chemical weapons attack affected hundreds of civilians. These images highlight the brutality of this conflict and the high price that entire populations pay for the inability of government and various rebel forces to declare a cease-fire and negotiate some measure of peace.

The chemical weapons attack crossed a [red line set by President Obama](#), a threshold that would force the U.S. to engage in military action aimed at sending a strong message that the use of chemical weapons is intolerable to the international community.

The brutality of this war, the number of dead, and now the use of chemical weapons has many of us asking what the international community can do, and what, if anything, should the U.S. do to ameliorate this situation. As people of faith we are called to ask specific questions as to the ethical or moral dimensions of the use of force in the case of military intervention, even if brief.

The Christian perspectives of pacifism/nonviolence, just war theory, and realism all affirm that war and the use of force is always a tragic choice, even when the end goal is peace. This speaks to our sinful and fallen nature, that the taking of life to

resolve conflicts is a mark of human failure.

Is military intervention in Syria a tragic choice called for and justified when analyzed through the lens of Christian ethics? The answer to this is a complex and qualified NO.

Christian Realism: This line of thought, which highlights the paradoxes between life lived by Kingdom values and the ruthlessness of life in fallen human society, is historically more comfortable advocating for the use of force as a tool to control and put an end to a protracted war and brutal tyranny. However, in the case of Syria, this position is faced with too many unknowns with regard to the after effects of any strategic use of force to limit the carnage in Syria. Commentators posit that any forceful intervention from the outside could result in an emboldened Assad government, a more violent coalition of rebel forces, or escalation across the Middle East region, all of these more violent and lengthier than before intervention.

Just War Tradition: Much of the considerations in the links below use the just war tradition to analyze the set of criteria that might, under extreme circumstances, justify the use of limited force for the purpose of achieving peace. While the brutality of the war in Syria, and the particular violation of international norms against chemical weapons, satisfies the criterion of just cause, careful consideration of some of the other criteria highlights why a military strike against Syria at the time is NOT an ethically viable decision.

Criteria FOR intervention:

- **Just cause:** There is agreement that limiting or stopping the violence in Syria is a just cause. **However, this does not make military intervention a just war.**

- **Right authority:** Currently, unless a nation is directly attacked, "right authority" in cases of military intervention has shifted from individual nation states to regional bodies, or, preferably, international agreement. To date a military strike by the U.S. is not supported by the international community or even ally countries. A unilateral military strike is not permissible under international law, which follows just war criteria, or in the views of Christian ethicists coming from the just war tradition.
- **Reasonable hope for success:** The consensus at this time is that the effects of any military strike at this point are unpredictable. President Obama speaks of the goal of bringing the war in Syria back to the limits of conventional war, which forbid the use of chemical weapons. However, the possibility that the violence will escalate and spread as a result is too high to consider that a limited strike would be successful in its goals.
- **Last resort:** The current feeling among many is that without the moral will to come to the table to negotiate a peaceful resolution to this conflict there is no other recourse to slow down the violence in Syria than to use force to bend the arm of the Assad government and perhaps the rebel factions. But this is precisely one of the key places where religious imagination has much to offer. Nonviolent options to try to bring about peaceful negotiations include diplomatic visitations, working with NGOs on the ground (both religious and secular), and interreligious efforts. The use of force must always be seen as a failure of imagination, and the resort to force must always be accompanied by a dedicated effort at finding alternative solutions. The links listed below agree that all nonviolent options have not, in fact, been exhausted.

Criteria during intervention:

- **Proportionality:** What are the possibilities that a "surgical" strike against military installations will in fact represent an overextension of U.S. military power? What insures that our use of military power will obey this criterion absent the support and supervision of the international community?
- **Non-combatant immunity:** There is almost guaranteed certainty that any strike targeted at military installations and at weakening Assad's access to chemical weapons will result in civilian casualties. The nature of the scenario on the ground prevents any military operation where civilian safety can be guaranteed. Therefore, the criterion of discrimination or non-combatant immunity cannot be met.

The criteria of the just war tradition work in concert with each other as a whole to restrict or restrain the use of force, not as a checklist of individual conditions that make the use of force permissible. The links below present a wide range of Christian and other voices that have applied the just war tradition and have conscientiously determined a unilateral strike against Syria illegal.

[Christian pacifism and nonviolence](#): Many Christian groups, such as the [World Council of Churches](#), [Pax Christi International](#), and the community of [St. Egidio](#), and others such as [the Society of Friends \(Quakers\)](#) do ongoing work to negotiate nonviolent resolutions to civil conflict. Their work is dedicated to bringing parties together, respecting each other's rights, and collectively considering alternative paths to achieving their goals, and ultimately peace. Quite often pacifism or nonviolence are dismissed as alternatives that are not practical in violent scenarios such as Syria. However, Christian pacifists are vested in finding alternative paths to peace, and will indeed work to negotiate among parties that

the international community or the U.S. have labeled as criminal or illegitimate. *Considering the high stakes of modern warfare and its high numbers of civilian deaths, the nonviolent position, with its focus on dialogue and negotiations, is gaining legitimacy among Christians wanting to offer a faith-based perspective for conflict resolution in the public square.*

It is imperative that communities of faith everywhere be emboldened to think creatively about the question of a possible military strike in Syria, and bring the best that their traditions have to offer on the ethics of the use of force to the public square. From the perspective of Christian ethics, it is clear that a military strike against Syria at this moment would be illegal and immoral.

Not taking military action, however, does not imply that we do nothing. Called by the Christian message of love of neighbor, we are indeed called to do something, especially in light of the resources available to us. Christian ethics calls me to think about human conflict and suffering through the lens of Kingdom values:

- **Solidarity:** How do we intervene on behalf of the countless refugees, half of them children, pouring into Lebanon and Turkey at the moment? We have a responsibility to garner international support for their protection and to supply the immediate needs of these masses. Many of our traditions have international aid bodies that need to be galvanized toward this goal, along with material aid from the U.S.
- **Hospitality:** We must welcome refugees in our land, at least temporarily, and to some extent share with them their destiny as displaced persons. Our communities of faith can extend a welcome to those who need a home and resources to relocate, and who perhaps need to

connect to other Syrians already living in our communities.

- **Courage:** Perhaps not personally, but through the different agencies of our denominations we must exercise a ministry of presence within Syria. This might sound like an irresponsible or impossible task. Obviously being present with or to the people of Syria involves serious danger to self and requires much prudential discernment. But the past evidences to the ways in which the presence of certain figures, for example the U.N. Secretary General, the Dalai Lama, or the Pope or Patriarch, has led to temporary cease-fire and at least the movement of resources to those areas most in need at the moment. A ministry of presence can also bring into the conflict a third party that might be trusted equally by opposing sides, and that could be seen as offering balance and neutrality to a very charged situation. In the protracted civil war in El Salvador, for example, the Jesuit community, among other actors, played such a role, communicating with the guerrillas, the peasants, and the government in efforts leading up to the cease-fire.

In circumstances as complex and desperate as the current situation in Syria it is easy for those of us trying to reflect on ethical responses to fall silent or to suffer from moral paralysis, dominated by a lack of language, vision, or imagination. Certainly, the events of last week put me in this very position. It was only when other colleagues began to speak that I felt there were indeed resources within my tradition that could be called on for a systematic and comprehensive reflection on the situation as well as being able to offer viable alternatives to the use of force.

