

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. James P. Eckman, President Emeritus
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska
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Syria, America and the Just War Tradition

President Obama's actions on Syria have been puzzling and difficult to assess. He declared that he would hold Syria accountable for crossing the now famous "red line" he drew a year ago. Under his orders, the military moved all the necessary equipment—planes and ships—into place, ready to strike Syria. Major Arab nations, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, especially, supported his efforts. Secretary of State John Kerry issued several qualifiers about the nature of the US strike, even stating it would be "unbelievably small." The US then continued to issue a series of forewarnings that enabled Syria to move its WMD stockpiles to more secure areas. But then Obama made the last minute decision to seek the support of Congress for the authorization to strike. This postponed any military action for several weeks. Then as Congress was poised to vote, albeit perhaps even reject Obama's request for authority, he began engaging with Russia about its proposed diplomatic solution that would involve Syria placing all of its chemical weapons under international supervision. Placing trust in Russia and Syria to seriously negotiate such a deal seems dubious, if not laughable. Yet, the US is pursuing such a deal. Whether it succeeds is problematic at best, impossible at worst. We shall know in a few weeks.

Regarding the Syrian crisis, there are so many moving pieces that it is difficult to attain a reliable and accurate picture of all that is occurring. We know this: The evidence against Assad using chemical weapons against his people is incontrovertible. According to columnist David Ignatius, even the Russians in private agree (and also agree that Assad must go, which seems highly doubtful given the most recent developments). Further, with its new president Rouhani in place, Iran appears to be changing its policies toward the US and toward its goal of nuclear weapons capability. Is it moving in a more moderate direction? If it seeks to become a more responsible diplomatic player in the region, it must provide evidence of this. Finally, Israel, given Obama's profound reluctance to get involved seriously in anything in the Middle East, realizes that it must take responsibility for its own security, including action against Iran. Its ability to do so is credible.

If the human race has learned anything from history it is this proposition: Credible threats of force prevent wars. Lack of credible threats of force produce wars. There is no better example of these propositions than the events leading up to the outbreak of World War II in September 1939. Appeasement did not work. Had the world (especially England and France) challenged Hitler's rearmament, his occupation of the Rhineland, the Anschluss, etc., the war could have been prevented. Arguably, Assad is not Hitler, but the proposition stands. All of Obama's posturing is lessening the credibility of the US and sending multiple and confused signals to Iran, North Korea, let alone to Assad of Syria. History will be the judge of his actions.

If the US (and/or other nations) ever utilizes military action against Assad, it will be presumably to ensure that he never uses such weapons again. But it should also be a deterrent against other

tyrants using such weapons in the future. The US should make this the laser-like focus for military action. The carnage of the Syrian civil war, especially Assad's use of chemical weapons, and the potential use of force by the US to punish him for doing so, necessitates that we as Christians review the entire concept of the Just War.

Pacifism and activism are the two extremes on the war issue. Pacifism says it is never right to use war as policy; activism says it is always right. Throughout the history of the church, a mediating view has developed called the just war tradition. This tradition sees some wars as unjust and some as just. The challenge lies in discerning which wars are just.

Since the time of the fifth century theologian Augustine, Christians have accepted the proposition that there exists a set of criteria whereby a war and its methods can be deemed "just." Augustine's arguments were refined by Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century and Reinhold Niebuhr in the 20th century. What follows is a summary of the most widely accepted criteria for the just war tradition:

1. **A Just Cause.** A just cause for the use of military force exists whenever it is necessary either to repel an unjust attack, to retake territory wrongly taken, or to punish evil. An example of this criterion is Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Ethically speaking, just war theorists argued that Saddam's action was a flagrant case of aggression and therefore it was justifiable for the world community to repel this unjust aggression. Is Assad's use of chemical weapons against his people a just cause?
2. **Right Authority.** This criterion focuses on established, legitimate, and properly constituted authority using military force for a "just cause." In the United States this "right authority" consists in the powers granted to the President of the United States by the War Powers Act or by a congressional declaration of war. In international affairs today, "right authority" might involve action by the UN Security Council authorizing the use of force. The point of this criterion focuses on legitimate authority, not private individuals who wage war. Currently, meeting this criterion in authorizing military action against Assad is murky. The UN will not authorize such action, and, at least for now, it is doubtful Congress would authorize it either.
3. **Right Intention.** This criterion stresses the end goal for the use of military force. The aim must be, for example, to turn back or undo aggression and then to deter such aggression in the future. The end for the use of force must be peace, not aggression or continued war. Again, the Gulf War of 1991 offers an example of this just war criterion. The world community had no aggressive aims against the territory or people of Iraq. "Right intention" in this conflict meant rolling back Saddam's aggression, establishing the peace of the Middle East and assuring that safeguards would protect that peace in the future. Whatever Obama decides to do with Assad, military action must be accompanied by an end goal stated with crystal-clear clarity.
4. **Proportionate Means.** As a criterion, this point centers on just means in the use of force; it must be appropriate to the goal. Allowing aggression, for example, to stand is condoning an evil in itself and opening the door to yet further evil. Therefore, any military force must be proportionate to the goal. Using nuclear weapons, for example, would be disproportionate in

rolling back aggression of a nation with no air force or navy. Using chemical and biological weapons is another example of disproportionate means. Striking military installations in Syria, hitting some of the storage areas of the WMD would be deemed proportionate under this criterion.

5. **Last Resort.** This criterion involves the legitimate government using all diplomatic and foreign policy resources, including economic sanctions, to force the aggressive nation to pull back. If the aggressor responds with intransigence and continued belligerence, the legitimate government has no choice but the use of military force. Again, the Iraq crisis of the 1990-1991 offers a classic example of this criterion: The allies used economic sanctions, diplomatic activity and personal diplomacy to alter Saddam Hussein's aggressive actions against Kuwait. He refused. Therefore, just war advocates argue, the world community was just in rolling back his aggressive actions. Certainly, as the US has pursued its zigzag policies of these last few weeks, any military action against Assad will be deemed a last resort.
6. **Noncombatant Immunity.** This is the most difficult criterion for the just war position. The military force used must be discriminate; it must follow the moral principle that seeks to protect noncombatants in a military strike or in a war. Of course this means going to all ends to not attack intentionally civilians, not to bomb civilian neighborhoods and not to kill intentionally and indiscriminately the civilian population of an enemy. Whatever the US does against Syria, its efforts must seek to honor this criterion.

In summary, the just war position argues that military action must be only for a just cause and not to pursue aggrandizement, glory or vengeance. Military action must be authorized by a legitimate authority and have a reasonable chance of success. The good that likely will result from the military action must outweigh the evil. Such action must be a last resort after less violent approaches have failed. Civilian populations must not be deliberately attacked; every effort must be made to minimize casualties among them and no unnecessary force must be wielded against either troops or civilians.

Should the US decide to use military force against Assad, it must take the ethical highroad in doing so. To that end, the President should make his case based on the principles of the Just War tradition. History teaches us that credible threats of force prevent wars. President Obama's recent actions raise serious doubts that he believes this. If all this diplomatic activity fails, in my view, he has no other alternative but a limited military strike defined clearly as punishment for Assad's barbarous actions with the goal of a deterrent against any such future actions. The Just War tradition gives guidance on how to do this.

See David Ignatius in www.washingtonpost.com (12 September 2013) and James P. Eckman, *Biblical Ethics*, pp. 59-68.