

Respond, But How? What We're Missing On Syria

Jim Wallis

When a head of state is responsible for the deaths of 100,000 of his people and has used chemical weapons against innocent civilians -- the world needs to respond. In one massive attack, the evidence appears to show that 1,429 people, including 400 children, suffered horrible deaths from chemical weapons banned by the international community. That is a profound moral crisis that requires an equivalent moral response. Doing nothing is not an option. But how should we respond, and what are moral principles for that response?

For Christians, I would suggest there are two principles that should guide our thinking. Other people of faith and moral sensibility might agree with this two-fold moral compass.

1. Our first commitment must be to the most vulnerable and those in most jeopardy. Two million Syrian refugees have now had to leave their country and fully a third of the Syrian people are now homeless in their own country. Lebanon, a country of 4 million people, now has nearly 1 million Syrian refugees. Humanitarian organizations are calling this the worst crisis in two decades.

Our Scriptures tell us that our first and deepest response should always be to the most vulnerable who are so often forgotten by the world. The world must respond to those millions of vulnerable and jeopardized people. Faith communities all over the world must respond and call upon our governments to do so as well. The U.S., U.K., and other concerned nations must do that -- immediately. And the international faith community should lead the way for a global response to millions of people in deep distress and danger.

2. The other task for people of faith and moral conscience is to work to reduce the conflict. Conflict resolution is always the first goal of peacemakers, whom Jesus calls us, as Christians, to always be. How do we act in ways that could lessen violence rather than escalate it? How do we unite the world community against the regime of Bashar al-Assad, put him on trial in absentia to prove that he used chemical weapons against innocent civilians, bring his criminality to the United Nations and other international bodies, and then surround him with global rejection, isolation, and punishment? How do we use this opportunity of his criminal behavior to pressure and even embarrass those nations who have supported him to support him no more?

These two principles make many of us in the faith community wary of the proposed military strikes that are now being considered by the White House, Congress, and others. Why?

Military options always have unintended consequences. We have seen that time and time again, as we have so recently and painfully learned in places like Iraq and Afghanistan. What are those possible consequences?

- Entering into the tactics of war can easily bring other players and nations into the war.
- Threats of retaliation and counter-retaliation are always a consequence of military actions.
- Assad himself could respond with even more brutality, which would require another U.S. response that deepens the conflict and creates a familiar cycle of violence.
- Tomahawk missiles and other weapons are not as reliably accurate as are often suggested. Military attacks always have civilian casualties. One errant U.S. missile killing more Syrian civilians would be the international story, replacing the one of Assad's alleged chemical attacks.
- The strikes that are being proposed would not eliminate Assad's chemical weapons capacity and might not deter further attacks. Nor might they significantly hurt his military forces or cripple his political power. Rather, they could help rally more of his people around him, as often happens when countries are attacked by outside forces. None of the purposes of the proposed military attacks are clear.

While the world wants to remove Assad's regime, will military strikes deter his power? The political alternatives seem very dangerous since terrorist groups lead much of Assad's opposition. Complicated political situations do not yield to easy military solutions. Political solutions are required -- beginning with ceasefires and careful diplomatic negotiations, which many, including Pope Francis, are now calling for.

By traditional just war standards, striking Assad has just cause and just intention, but its probability of success and proportionality is still very unclear, and the just war criteria of last resort is still a ways away.

Jesus' call to be peacemakers takes us in a different direction than missile strikes. I believe the just cause being laid out against Assad is indeed a moral case, and I trust both President Barack Obama and Secretary John Kerry's intentions around that cause. But I believe that the military strikes now being proposed are not the best moral response to this moral crisis -- and they could ultimately undermine both our moral case and the moral intentions.

The jump we often make from just causes and moral cases to military actions reveals our dependence on old habits of war as our only response to conflict and injustice. It also reveals our lack of imagination for finding better responses. Many Democrats, who sometimes question our rush to war, seem to be lining up behind the White House; the Republicans, who often favor military responses, are still struggling with their response in light of their general opposition to the president. But the political submission to the military strikes seems to be increasing. At the same time, religious opposition to a primary reliance on military responses seems to be growing.

Pope Francis said this week, "War brings on war! Violence brings on violence." And he supports a negotiated settlement of the Syrian civil war, calling upon people of faith around the world to pray and fast for peace this Saturday, Sept. 7.

Geoff Tunnicliffe, CEO of the World Evangelical Alliance, pointed out the negative effect military strikes would have on Christians in the Middle East. New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan said in a letter to Obama that strikes would be "counterproductive" and "exacerbate an already deadly situation." And the Southern Baptist Convention's Russell Moore echoed the concerns, saying, there are just-cause principles missing "both to justify action morally and to justify it prudentially."

The Christian community is raising questions about military strikes. But the risks of military strikes should not result in doing nothing in response to Assad. The clear moral case for intervention requires a more imaginative moral response than military action. The complications of the Syrian situation must not lead to a passive response but to a more creative one. We need to create a unified international strategy to hold the Assad regime morally accountable for its actions.

Assad's use of chemical weapons could be used to open up more international cooperation, even with Syria's allies, who strongly disapprove of chemical weapons. And supporting more moderate forces in Syria should become a more urgent priority. It's time to punish Assad without further punishing his people, his neighbors, the stability of the region, and the security of the rest of the world. We must hold Assad accountable, pressure the world to join, protect the vulnerable, and ultimately find a political solution.

A moral crisis does require a moral response. The faith community and others must speak and act to make sure that our response prioritizes the most moral -- and the most effective -- actions as possible.

Jim Wallis is president of [Sojourners](#). His book, [On God's Side: What Religion Forgets and Politics Hasn't Learned About Serving the Common Good](#), is now available.