Opinion
Guest Voices
Members of the Iranian Red Crescent Society inspect a damaged building following an Israeli

Members of the Iranian Red Crescent Society inspect a damaged building following an Israeli strike, amid the ongoing Iran-Israel conflict, in a location given as Iran, in this screengrab obtained from a handout video released on June 25. (OSV News/Handout via Reuters/Iranian Red Crescent Society)



by David Carroll Cochran

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Was the recent U.S. attack on Iran's nuclear sites justified under the just war framework the Catholic Church has historically used to judge the morality of military action? It was not.

The Trump administration has said the attack was defensive, arguing it was necessary to protect the United States and our allies, especially Israel, by stopping Iran's nuclear weapons program and, according to the president, perhaps even toppling the Iranian regime itself. The just war framework certainly considers defense against armed aggression a just cause for going to war, and some versions include a narrow provision for "preemptive war," where a country may strike first if it is about to suffer a certain and overwhelming attack and has no other options left.

But the key is that the threat of attack must be "instant" or "imminent" (in international law, this is known as the Caroline doctrine, after an American ship

attacked by British forces during a now obscure 1837 dispute at the border between Canada and New York). What the just war tradition consistently rules out is "preventive" war against other countries because they may be in a position to attack you or your allies sometime in the future, rightly seeing this as actually encouraging military aggression under the guise of defending against it.

> War is consistently less effective than its nonmilitary alternatives.
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Nuclear nonproliferation is important, but that doesn't mean countries such as the U.S. and Israel, who already have such weapons, are automatically justified in going to war against rivals who don't. That's using war to maintain advantageous balances of power rather than defending against imminent attacks. And ahead of Sunday's bombing, the Trump administration's own intelligence officials concluded that while Iran was getting close to having enough enriched uranium to build one or more bombs, its leaders had still not decided whether or not to do so. What did these intelligence officials think would tip the Iranian regime toward deciding to produce such a weapon? U.S. attacks on its nuclear facilities!

Which brings us to one of the most overlooked principles in the just war framework, one that ends up undermining the framework itself. This is the requirement that, given the evil warfare unleashes, a country should not go to war unless there is a high probability of success. The problem is that political science research on armed conflict reveals that when countries use military force, especially airstrikes, they usually fail to achieve their goals and almost never change the behavior of those they target. War is consistently less effective than its nonmilitary alternatives.

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In spite of President Donald Trump's boast that the airstrikes had "completely and totally obliterated" Iran's nuclear program, a preliminary classified U.S. analysis has concluded that they set it back only a few months. The reality is that even more airstrikes are unlikely to permanently derail the country's ability to acquire nuclear weapons if it really wants them.

Being bombed also gives Iran all the more reason to try and join the nuclear club in order to deter future attacks. In fact, compared to armed force, nonmilitary incentives and sanctions have a better track record of stopping nuclear proliferation. (A good example is the 2015 agreement with Iran itself, which Trump, in a fit of pique, scuttled during his first term.) Furthermore, beyond the question of nuclear weapons, attacking Iran is even less likely to change the way the country pursues its regional goals, and thinking that bombing Iran will somehow overthrow its current regime in favor of one more friendly to the U.S. and Israel is the most farfetched of all.

All this means that the best way to think about the U.S. attack on Iran, as well as other military conflicts around the world, is not through a just war lens at all, but rather through the "just peace" framework that the Catholic Church has increasingly embraced since the Second Vatican Council. Given war's failures and terrible human costs, this approach focuses instead on nonmilitary ways to constructively engage and transform conflicts, break cycles of violence and build durable peace.

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Indeed, Pope Leo XIV's statements immediately following the U.S. bombing consistently used just peace rather than just war language. He said: "War does not solve problems, but rather it amplifies them," "Every member of the international community has a moral responsibility: Stop the tragedy of war," "Let diplomacy silence the weapons," and "Let nations chart their future with works of peace, not with violence and bloody conflicts!"

Flying multibillion dollar airplanes to the other side of the earth to drop more bombs on yet another country on the theory that more war will make us more secure doesn't only violate traditional just war principles. It also illustrates the need to embrace different ways of thinking about war and peace that more effectively transform conflicts, break cycles of violence and cultivate genuine peace.