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The argument for limited intervention in Syria

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I have waited as long as possible to write about the situation in Syria. This is primarily because I was unsure what I really wanted to say or what I believed should be done there. I have decided to consider the issue from three vantage points. First, I want to share a bit of a personal retrospective. I am not so much interested in showing the reader where I'm coming from as trying to determine for myself where I have been and where I stand at the present. This will be followed by a look at the moral questions involved, and finally, the politics of the issue will be explored.

I'm pretty sure the result of this exercise will be to declare that the issue is really complicated. That may not seem like much, but for those who may think the solution is simple or unambiguous, it may be worth reconsidering. It may also serve as an example of a process others may find helpful in reaching their own conclusions on the matter.

While I was a seminary student in the 1960s, the peace movement was gathering steam. The Catholic position on war and the just war theory was undergoing a reassessment. The opposition to the Vietnam War was intense and especially powerful on college campuses, including seminaries. The Berrigan brothers, Philip and Daniel, were a key influence. Philip Berrigan, a powerful and compelling speaker, spoke to us at the seminary on a number of occasions.

I definitely moved close to pacifism at that time, yet I never went as far as some did. I still believed in the right of self-defense, and I still believed there were times when it was necessary to intervene to make things better. My opposition to war seemed to be more to specific wars than all wars. For example, I approved intervening in Afghanistan after 9/11 but opposed intervention in Iraq.

Many are now speaking out about the moral issues involved in intervention in Syria. These powerful voices include that of Pope Francis and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Who could not be in

favor of immediate peace talks leading to a lasting and just peace in the area?

On the other hand, what do we know about the current situation in Syria? Although some may dispute it, there seems to be credible evidence that the government has made use of chemical weapons against its own people. Even without chemical weapons, the atrocities and loss of life occurring daily have certainly crossed some sort of red line. Finally, from a religious perspective, Christians are experiencing severe persecution, including efforts to drive them from the country and perhaps the entire Middle East.

Some have noted intervention may be counterproductive. This is, of course, true. How can anyone know what the results of intervention may be? Yet the alternative is to do nothing. It is worth looking at previous interventions. The intervention in Kosovo would be considered successful. Intervention in Somalia was initially successful but ultimately turned bad. We also had some initial success even in Libya. We failed to intervene in Rwanda, and genocide resulted.

Certainly there can be a variety of interpretations to these events, and others could be put forth. Yet I believe the one thing that is clear is not all interventions are bad, nor are all of them good. One has to consider, however, that lives may be saved and atrocities prevented.

I guess I believe in the principle that if we can do something that might help others, we should do it. There is reason for people to agree or disagree that intervention here may be helpful, but I believe we would all have to agree that the result is ultimately unknowable. For me, in that light, sitting still and watching the carnage continue is problematic. While others warn of dangerous and growing entanglements, there is no reason to believe the situation will improve by doing nothing.

I did not include Iraq or Afghanistan in my list of interventions because I do not believe they are comparable, which leads to my third category of politics. These two interventions are of an entirely different nature and provide political cover for refusing to get involved in Syria, but they only serve as a distraction. The United States has frequently been involved in limited interventions. I see no reason to believe this conflict will result in a wider war. A failure to act will be just as likely to embolden other powers in the region.

Presidential candidates have taken advantage of a population weary of war to distort the nature of the potential intervention. Additionally, a hatred of anything President Barack Obama plays into the equation, and that even goes for a number of politicians who might under normal circumstances be inclined to support such an intervention.

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Also, the current dysfunctional Congress may not be willing to take action under any circumstances. This Congress has proven not only incapable of taking action but seems to take pride in refusing to do anything. National security issues may not be exempt from such a philosophy. I think it disturbing that such an important decision should be determined by those who simply don't want to act for any reason.

Some might say political considerations are unimportant when it comes to considering such action. Yet politics pervades everything we do. Every legislator who votes on this decision will be making a political calculation. The consequences of not giving the president the power to act may well be enormous. The world will see us as lacking unity and unable to take decisive action. Our foreign policy will become subject to the desires of Congress. This has not been true since Thomas Jefferson went to war against the Barbary pirates in the early 1800s.

We hear frequent cries for diplomacy. Who is not for diplomacy? Diplomatic efforts have been and continue to be made. Neither side is interested at this time. History suggests diplomacy only works when conditions have been achieved that will bring the parties to the table. Too many people are dying, often in horrific fashion. We may be able to do something about it. While others will no doubt legitimately come to a different conclusion, I think we should try. I vote for limited intervention.

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