Tread softly in the moral minefield

There’s evidence that government forces in Syria have used chemical weapons, but still the United States and Britain are evaluating whether to intervene in the conflict, and if so, how. Here a moral theologian finds sound reasons for taking a cautious approach.

Is it time for nations in the Western alliance to escalate their opposition to the Assad regime in Syria? Reports that chemical weapons had been used by the Syrian army in two attacks—one near Damascus and one in Aleppo—have raised anew the issue of military support for the anti-government forces. Whether there should be a policy change by Western nations in the backing they provide the rebels has once more become a topic of vigorous debate publicly and behind the scenes.

Britain’s Prime Minister, David Cameron, indicated there was “growing evidence” of the use of the poison sarin by the Syrian Government forces and that such use crossed a “red line.” The latter term referred to President Obama’s statement on 20 August 2012 that “a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being used. That would change my calculations.” Cameron declared that the Syrian army’s action constituted a war crime and that it was now time for the Coalition Government and its allies to put more pressure on the Assad regime to bring it to an end. However, he did not call for Western troops to enter Syrian territory. In the US, Senator John McCain, one of Obama’s passionate critics on Syria, also stopped short of calling for US troops on the ground while advocating military aid for the rebel forces.

For his part, the US President took a more cautious path. He cited the need for greater information on just what happened with the two attacks, both the nature of the weapons used and also whether their use came with high-level government approval or a lower-level military leader’s decision in the midst of battle. It should also be remembered that the resort to sarin in two limited instances does not equate to Obama’s impeccable standard of “a whole bunch of” chemical weapons being used.

According to some military analysts, there is no compelling rationale for the Assad Government to use chemical weapons. The regime has shown itself capable of terrorising its population without such weapons. And there is no significant military advantage gained by such limited use. So it is not unimaginable that the two cases reflect not the policy of the Assad regime but rather the frustration of military commanders in the field acting impulsively in the heat of a skirmish.

On the other hand, this may be a situation where the Syrian Government is testing the limits, seeing how far it can push before it arouses a strong reaction. Seen that way, Assad may be trying to depress the fighting spirit of the rebels by showing that the West will not come to their aid even as he raises the ante in the deadly high stakes game he has been playing. And the psychological terror that news of the use of sarin will create within the Syrian population may be part of his calculation as well.

At the moment, these are questions to which we do not have answers. What we do know is that this has been a barbarous conflict in which tens of thousands of civilians have been killed and many more injured and/or driven from their homes as refugees or internally displaced persons. The Government’s forces have shown little regard for norms of discrimination or proportionality in the prosecution of the civil war.

We also know that the rebel forces, while predominantly Syrian, are now being strengthened by outside fighters whose motivation is religious, seeing this as a Sunni uprising against the Alawite Government of Assad with its Shiite supporters in Iran and Iraq. What links these external fighters have with global terrorist networks are a concern for those opposed to giving military aid to the rebels. Where will the aid end up? For those who have recently fought in Afghanistan and once supported Afghan guerrillas in their battle with Soviet Russia, the worry about “blowback” is not easily dismissed.

So, from an American perspective, what are Western nations to do, faced with the suffering of Syria’s people and the recent evidence of chemical weapons use? In thinking one’s way through to a response, several factors must be taken into account.

Chemical weapons are banned by international treaty law, although Syria is one of six nations that are non-signatories to the 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention. The use of such weapons should not be ignored, or the force of international law will be undermined by those who habitually ignore it and go unpunished. So chemical weapons are part of the equation but there are more factors at work.

There are good reasons for Obama’s caution, even after the recent incidents of chemical warfare. “Do something— anything— to stop the bloodshed and suffering of innocents” may be understandable as an expression of frustration, even desperation. Yet it is not advisable as a policy.

Any student of ethics is familiar with the old chestnut about a person drowning in the river while another person watches from the shore. Should the bystander jump in to save the individual? One can only answer, it depends. If the person on the shore cannot swim, it does not make sense to dive in and create a situation with two drowning persons. A trained lifeguard incurs a different obligation. Having convincingly demonstrated its weakness as a swimmer in the current of Middle East politics, the US quite rightly is thinking twice about diving in yet again.

But ought not a bystander to consider alternatives in order to save a life? Maybe there is a rowing boat handy that could be used, or a life preserver that could be thrown to the drowning person? By all means one should
look for strategies to help. In the Syrian situation, what might they be? To say there is a lack of enthusiasm for another military venture in the Middle East region hardly captures the US public's mood. Establishing no-fly zones near borders with neighbouring countries would require anti-aircraft batteries, helicopters, radar systems, and the people to operate them since the rebels have few soldiers with necessary skills. To create humanitarian corridors for civilians to escape would require tens of thousands of troops on the ground. Furthermore, neither proposal prevents the use of chemical weapons.

Provision of weaponry and other material so the rebels can take the fight to the Government presumes the ability to distinguish those forces that are truly democratic and supportive of a religiously pluralist society from others representing Sunni intolerance. Few Alawites or Christians or even secular Sunnis are confident that what follows post-Assad will be a society and state committed to toleration and minority rights. In whose hands will the Western-supplied weaponry wind up?

Yet another element in the equation is that the "red line" for Syria that Obama, Cameron and others have repeatedly cited is not the only "red line." For years there have been warnings issued to Iran about crossing the line in itsuranium production. America and other allies have sought Israeli restraint towards Iran as diplomatic activity continues in fits and starts. Behind the Israeli inaction is a US pledge that it will not let Iran develop a nuclear weapon. If the US ignores the red line for Syria, will Israel continue to trust the pledge of a red line for Iran? Will Iran be emboldened by Western inaction towards Syria?

There are many questions with few convincing answers on the topic of Syria. Since the use of chemical weapons has been the impetus in renewed calls for action, the first step is for the allies to make an indisputable case that the Assad regime did indeed use chemical arms, a case that will withstand any questioning by Russia. Then the allies should go back to the UN Security Council to see if Russia can be moved to join in sanctioning the Assad regime. Diplomacy must be exhausted before considering military aid that ratchets up the violence. A second step is gathering more intelligence about the various groups that constitute the anti-government forces. We must know whether military aid can be provided that will not end up strengthening the most radical Islamist segments of the rebellion.

Taking the above steps suggests that Obama has been correct to avoid rushing to change a policy that withholds military aid. Uncertainty need not mean paralysis but it does suggest we move slowly until we can see the road ahead more clearly.

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