

# A TIME FOR WAR A TIME FOR PEACE

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On December 23<sup>rd</sup> of last year, Al Jazeera released unconfirmed reports that a gas attack killed 7 civilians in a rebel held neighborhood. On March 19<sup>th</sup> 2013, unconfirmed reports surfaced that missiles armed with chemical materials may have been fired into several districts largely held by the opposition. Both sides accused each other of carrying out the attacks. The United States was staying out of it. We needed more proof.

There were reports from a variety of international news agencies and later a public statement from a Syrian army general admitting that he was instructed to use chemical weapons against the rebels. He said he didn't obey these orders.

Using soil samples as evidence, Britain and France sent a confidential letter to the Syrian government claiming evidence of the use of chemical weapons on more than one occasion. By the end of April, the US government was also acknowledging the evidence, specifically of Sarin gas. The White House was unwilling to make any definitive statements before more verification and assessment of the intelligence had been done. Syria refused any further investigation, even sponsored by the United Nations. The UN, recognizing the severity of the accusations, said that refusal of investigation won't stop it from happening.

On April 29<sup>th</sup>, another chemical attack was reported. The injured were taken to Turkey where use of Sarin gas was confirmed. After two months undercover, several French reporters personally witnessed the Syrian army using chemical weapons on civilians. The United Nations declared "reasonable grounds" to believe that chemical weapons have been used in at least four attacks in the civil war, but were not able to determine the perpetrator. In June, British and French authorities claimed proof of the use of Sarin attained by blood of the victims and passed it on to the US government. This time, there was video. Children writhing on the floor. Some so gruesome, it was shown in closed door sessions to only a select few. The US joined our allies in announcing definitively that the Assad government had used chemical weapons, killing 100-150 people. Russia, using their own methods of verification, came to the same conclusion about Sarin, but claimed that the weapons were launched by rebel forces, not the Syrian government. In August, the Assad government launched another attack killing an additional 1429 people. 400 were children. Russia agrees that this attack was government sponsored.

Is this a time for war or a time for peace?

After the guns of World War I fell silent, the world's nations convened in Geneva to outlaw for the first time an entire class of weapons. Barely one percent of the war's battlefield deaths had come from toxic chemicals, yet these had evoked greater horror than the blast wounds, shrapnel and bullets that killed millions more. Even before the first clouds of deadly chlorine gas swept over French lines in 1915, the use of poisons in warfare was widely seen as taboo. In 1863, in the middle of America's bloodiest war, the U.S. War Department issued a decree banning poisoning in any form, including the use of poison-tipped bullets. Jonathan Tucker, the author of "War of Nerves," a history of chemical weapons, argued that there's something primal in the human revulsion to such weapons. "This 'chemical weapons taboo' appears to have originated in the innate human aversion to poisonous substances," Tucker writes, "as well as revulsion at the duplicitous use of poison... without a fair fight."

Chemical toxins became a true weapon of mass destruction during World War I, when European chemists were enlisted on both sides to help end the stalemate in the trenches. Chlorine, phosgene and mustard gas would eventually kill more than 90,000 soldiers and wound nearly a million others. While the death toll was relatively small, gas attacks were feared because they frequently left victims in agony for days. Public disgust over the use of such toxins helped drive support for the 1925 Geneva treaty banning the use of chemical weapons, as well as the more robust 1997 Chemical Weapons Convention that has been ratified by all but a handful of the world's nations. Among the remaining holdouts are North Korea and Syria, both of which are said to possess stockpiles of chemical munitions.

A few weeks ago, with the broad recognition of the use of chemical weapons in Syria, President Obama

accused the Assad government of “crossing a moral and legal red line” and denounced the attacks as an assault on human dignity. The international community seems to agree. The President spent a good deal of political capital in Congress hoping to get a vote to declare war on Syria. He was looking for support for what he called “limited military strikes”.

National opinion quickly fell along familiar lines. Democrats supporting Democrats, Republicans supporting Republicans. Us and Them. If they like it, We don't. At this point in the national conversation, what “it” is seems irrelevant. Very few people are immune. Everyone knows what side they're on and more importantly, what side they are not on. That side.

So when Obama started talking about the possibility of war, the Republicans, so quick to aggression under a Republican president, were singing the praises of inaction and Democrats, who were critical of becoming the world's police under President Bush, were warming up to the idea. I have been horrified by the media pundits who have transformed a moral crisis into a political game. They wonder how Obama's support of military action will affect his healthcare bill or if it will weaken his second term.

We're talking about Sarin gas. We're talking about killing more people- on both sides of the line. We're talking about a massive international crisis the consequences for which are entirely unknown and the people paying attention, the media, the people helping us to sort through the complexities of the choices before us, are distracted by popularity contests.

Have we become so detached that we can no longer feel the weight of these decisions?

Lest I fall victim to the same distractions, I will try to focus on the moral issues at hand.

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. One thousand, four hundred and twenty nine people. Four hundred children. Sarin gas.

Sarin is a clear, odorless, tasteless, colorless nerve agent. It's considered one of the most brutal of the chemical weapons. It functions like an insecticide.

This is a profound moral crisis that requires an equivalent moral response. Doing nothing is not an option.

I am a card carrying peacenik. I've never met a war I liked. I know my history well enough to see the long story and, mostly in hindsight of course, have been able to imagine alternative solutions. I rarely think it's a time for war.

WWII is complicated. I can see the long story clearly. I can see the role of the international community and propaganda and charismatic leadership. I know there were many places along the path when the Holocaust could have been prevented. But by the time the US was interested in what was happening in Europe, we were facing industrialized genocide. Innocent people were being tortured and killed by the thousands, hundreds of thousands, by the millions. Children being torn from their mothers, starving, being experimented on. The suffering was so massive, just the hint of it makes most of us recoil for fear that a Holocaust story might be coming. I won't tell one. I don't have to. We all carry them with us. And the United States stayed out of it for a long time. We didn't have definitive proof. We were war weary. It wasn't our fight. We had problems of our own. And Hitler's army swept through Europe enacting atrocities more horrific than the human imagination could have previously comprehended.

Card carrying peacenik. I see clearly where, over the course of decades, history could have been altered in such a way as to have prevented even the Holocaust. But, even I have to admit that once those chemical weapons were being used, once gas chambers had been designed and populated, the only option left was violence. Given our delayed response, once we were willing to pay attention, the time for peace had ended.

Our first commitment must be to the most vulnerable and those in most immediate jeopardy. Two million Syrian refugees have now had to leave their country and fully a third of the Syrian people are now homeless inside Syria. Lebanon, a country of 4 million people, now has nearly 1 million Syrian refugees. Imagine that. 25% increase in population over the last few months and every refugee is poor and hungry and desperate. Proportionally speaking, it would be like 2 million people showing up in NYC with no where to go, nothing to eat, nothing to claim but the clothes on their backs. We'd be overwhelmed and entirely unable to help them.

Humanitarian organizations are calling this the worst crisis in decades.

Our first and deepest response should always be to the most vulnerable who are too often forgotten. The world has an obligation to respond to those millions of defenseless and jeopardized people. The international community should join together for a global response in defense of those in deep distress and danger.

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. The question I've been living with is "How do we act in ways that could lessen violence rather than escalate it?"

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. Entering into the tactics of war can easily bring other players and nations into play. 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 continues the cycle of violence. Military strikes 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.

It's a time for peace. The time for war is not yet.

And then I remember Auschwitz. I remember the millions of people sent to their deaths because so many of us wanted to avoid violence. We wanted to negotiate, let the parties work it out themselves, mind our own business.

I have been wrestling with this question. When is violence justified? When I was deep in the peace movement in college, other students would pose impossible scenarios, horrific things and then say "and you aren't going to fight back?" My typical response was "I hope in the moment to be more creative than that." But here we are, facing a moment, a genuine moral crisis and I've had to consider the possibility that violence is an option. Can we, as moral people, people of conscience, allow the use of Sarin gas without global outrage? Can we declare that political lines and national boundaries separate us from the victims enough to keep our opinions to ourselves? Or are we called to military action?

I have decided that violence is the option of small minds, and as Unitarian Universalists, we have always been able to think bigger than that. As people of faith, we have a moral responsibility to protect those who are most vulnerable, but that response doesn't require violence. Political solutions are required — beginning with ceasefires and careful diplomatic negotiations, which are now well under way and are even looking very good with the help of Russia and the larger international community. There might be a time for war, but that time is not now.

I believe the cause being laid out against Assad is indeed a moral case. 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.

But eliminating military strikes as an option should not result in doing nothing in response to Assad. If we had responded to Hitler years earlier, if we'd responded to the German people earlier, genocide could have been avoided. The clear moral case for intervention requires a more imaginative moral response than military action, but one that is fully engaged in the world. The complications of the Syrian situation must not lead to a passive response but to a creative one. We need a unified international strategy to hold the Assad regime 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. Faith communities must speak and act to make sure that our response prioritizes the most moral and the most effective actions as possible.

But the time for war is not today. This is a time for peace, a time to recognize human worth by avoiding greater crisis for the Syrian people. This is a time for life-giving action. A time to feed those who are hungry and clothe those who are naked and comfort those who are afraid. We are called to greater awareness of what's happening, not to be distracted by internal politics or media pundits. As people of conscience, this is not a time for us to look away, tempting as that might be. Syria, after all, is so far away. It is a time for caring, for opening ourselves to their stories and for supporting creative solutions that let us – all of us – live in a time for peace.