Interrupting Hostilities and Authentic Accountability in Syria

CMSM recognizes the incredible challenge of the present moment in Syria in the midst of this ongoing tragedy. Yet, we see a great opportunity for the U.S. to interrupt the interactions of hostility by taking the initiative to recognize that authentic accountability is primarily about increasing understanding and addressing resulting harms to relationships; encouraging more empathy for those who’ve suffered and taking of responsibility for harm, and ensuring restitution. This is not a choice between military action and "doing nothing," a frame which again is being used to legitimate violence.

Rather than deterring behavior or bringing an end to the violence that has already cost more than 100,000 lives, U.S. military strikes threaten to widen the vicious civil war in Syria, undermine prospects to de-escalate the violence, eventually reach a just negotiated settlement, and ensure authentic accountability.

Assad or whoever used chemical weapons will not “learn” a lesson this way. Assad will only harden and increase hostilities. The armed resistance to Assad will also take any military strike by the U.S. as a sign to increase their hostilities. Further, Iran, Israel and even Russia would likely increase their participation in the hostilities. Research shows that foreign military interventions for rebel groups often lead to a 40% increase by the government in civilian deaths.

We encourage the Congress and the President to consider the following options:

1) **Diplomatic and Legal Focus:** Now more than ever is it time to re-invigorate the plans for peace negotiations. Because “red-lines” have been crossed, “credibility” should be maintained by signaling to the world the urgency and our willingness to lead the effort for a peace conference toward both ending the violence and to creating authentic accountability. Russia and Iran have condemned the use of chemical weapons in Syria; thus, work closely and consistently with Russia, the UN, and other key regional actors, including Iran to make this happen. Rather than increasing hostilities, this is what human dignity and the true "responsibilities of nations" looks like. The negotiations should include key civil society nonviolent actors and include determination of broader accountability mechanisms.

2) **Resist the Temptation of Fueling the Fire with more violence:** In the spirit of Martin Luther King on this 50th anniversary and even more recently of Antoinette Tuff, we must interrupt the interactions of hostility. Press Saudi, Qatar, and Turkey to participate in drawing down their supply of weapons to the armed resistance. This will help collaboration with Russia and Iran to simultaneously draw down arms provisions to Assad. If Russia does not cooperate, it may be time to withdraw some economic cooperation with Russia. Further, empirical research is clear that violent revolution not only cultivates other habits of violence and is less effective in
achieving short-term political goals, but also very rarely leads to a durable democracy. Thus, it is a false premise to simply think that by increasing such violence to “punish,” "send a message,” or even to gain military equity or advantage, that negotiations will likely lead to a durable democracy, much less a just peace.

3) **Explore Restorative Justice Responses:** The President said the following in his recent MLK Dedication speech:

"But he (MLK) also understood that to bring about true and lasting change, there must be the possibility of reconciliation; that any social movement has to channel this tension through the spirit of love and mutuality…He would call on us to assume the best in each other rather than the worst, and challenge one another in ways that ultimately heal rather than wound."

In accord with this wisdom, we suggest that the way to actually "send a message" about such horrific behavior is to set up processes of authentic accountability that lean toward mutual understanding, empathy for those who suffer, human needs, and developing plans for restitution, protection, and healing. For example, regarding the most recent atrocity and UN investigation, what if we set up initial dialogue or restorative circles with trained facilitators? Participants could include family members of those killed, members of the Assad government, of the armed resistance, of local community organizers, etc. Out of such circles, plans for healing and broader accountability might be developed. These might take place outside of Syria if need be, and could gradually expand to include more and more stakeholders. The impact on the social conditions would make ceasefire and negotiations more likely and more just. These small-scale but focused efforts today would provide the groundwork for larger-scale efforts later after the violence subsides. Groups such as Catholic Relief Services and Cure Violence are already engaged in similar initiatives with Syrians. The International Criminal Court may also be a useful resource, when enhanced by restorative justice measures.

4) **Utilize Peace Forces:** Support deploying unarmed civilian peacekeeping forces to areas with significant number of Syrians committed to or on the verge of peace. These peace forces might be the UN, NGO’s, such as the Nonviolent Peaceforce, or regional actors. These will help shift the dynamic in a concrete way on the ground, particularly when complemented with other elements such as the suggestions above. A unique form of power could be unleashed if a group of prominent religious leaders across key traditions went to Syria as a peace force to engage the armed actors and defuse the hostilities. **Prof. Tobias Winright gives the example of Mother Teresa's entry into Lebanon** in 1982 during hostilities to rescue disabled Muslim children to illustrate an example of such power. **Pope Francis'** clear resistance to violence and call for a period of prayer and fasting for Syria on September 7th may be stimulating such power as well.

Tragedy presents us with another opportunity to become people who transform conflict with courage and love. Let's engage the adventure and become such people.

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