

Civil society provides common ground in Syria

Written by Mel Duncan Founding Director Nonviolent Peaceforce
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During my visit to Syria and Lebanon last May, I met with representatives of the Syrian government, religious leaders, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, Hezzbolah, the nonviolent opposition, the Free Syrian Army and the UN. Most importantly I talked with refugees in Lebanon and internally displaced people in rebel held territories in Syria.

While the use of chemical weapons is deplorable, any action must be viewed through the lens of what will help lead to a just and lasting peace. Mass atrocities have accelerated for over two years killing more than 100,000 people, including many civilians. All sides have targeted civilians.

The end of the war will require a political, not military, settlement. There will be no quick or easy fixes. Firing Cruise missiles and bombing military sites will escalate the conflict in a tense region already teeming with weapons. These actions will fuel a furious spiral of violence.

Syrians must decide Syria's future. What started as a nonviolent uprising has been hijacked into a geo-political, sectarian war that is anything but civil. The displaced people I met don't care a whit about these international crosscurrents. They want to go home. Yet the country is whipped by proxy wars: US-Russia, Iran-Saudi Arabia, Israel-Hezbollah and on and on. And religious differences have been inflamed in what was a secular country. As one colleague from Aleppo told me, "I didn't know I was Sunni until I was 20."

At this very moment, courageous Syrian women and men are working for a peaceful settlement. They are mostly ignored by the world. Most of them are opposed to the government. Some lean towards the regime. They are doing peacebuilding and reconciliation work. They are establishing local ceasefire zones. While differing in view points they share a commitment to a peaceful, pluralistic and democratic Syria. One nonviolent opposition leader explained, "We have much more in common with the 'logical loyalists' than the radical opposition. We don't want to live under Sharia law."

The Syrians working nonviolently for a sustainable Syria deserve our support, not a fragmented, violent opposition who are committing war crimes. These civil society actors, a substantial number of who are women, provide the common ground for a peaceful transition. They need diplomatic and financial support. Their leadership needs to be promoted in the international initiatives including Geneva II. Chairs at negotiating tables should not be reserved exclusively for men with guns.

On the international level President Obama and other leaders can decrease the violence to

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allow civil society to do their work. They can help stop the flow of weapons. The US can start by withdrawing our support for armed actors and engaging Russia to follow suit. The two nations could exert tremendous pressure on their respective allies to stop supplying weapons. They could jointly offer a Security Council resolution sanctioning any nation supplying arms to any group in Syria.

Likewise, the US and Russia could lead the way in establishing a ceasefire. They could create an opening for the new leadership in Iran to play a constructive role.

Unarmed civilian peacekeepers could be deployed to protect civilians and support Syrian civil society in preventing violence and building peace from the ground up. Such nonviolent peacekeepers could come from international civil society and thus, not represent national or multi-national interests. Indeed, unarmed civilian peacekeepers are working effectively today in such places as the Mindanao region of the Philippines, South Sudan and Colombia.

As Congress debates a military intervention, we must engage our moral imaginations. A host of effective options lie between doing nothing and firing Cruise missiles. The methods are there. The people are ready. Will there be the political courage to invoke them?