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On Right Intention and Trump's Syria Strikes

Peter Henne

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Quantum physics tells us that, before we observe it, a particle exists as a quantum field. All of its infinite possibilities exist simultaneously, spread out across the entire universe. But when we observe it, this quantum field collapses into the particle we detect. This is similar to the process that occurs in the run-up to the use of force in international relations. All the hypothetical scenarios, policy implications, and moral quandaries surrounding the potential use of force suddenly collapse into a discrete, observable event.

This week, it is the US missile strikes against the Syrian regime. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has been committing atrocities against his population since a civil war broke out in Syria in the aftermath of the Arab Spring protests. President Obama attempted to resolve the conflict between the Syrian government and rebels while also fighting the growing Islamic State threat in the region. He hesitated to take forceful action against Assad, however. This led to criticism of his Administration, especially after a 2013 chemical weapons attack by Assad violated Obama's "red-line" on the use of these weapons. Earlier this week Assad launched another chemical weapons attack against his people. And Thursday evening, Donald Trump authorized cruise missile strikes against the airfield used in the attack.

So what should we think about this? It is a difficult situation, especially for people (like me) who wish Obama had been more forceful in his interactions with Assad.

First, the pro-strike side. Assad is a war criminal. He has killed and tortured his people with both conventional and chemical weapons. Something had to be done. And air strikes have a good chance of crippling his air force and minimizing his ability to further harm his people.

But there's the con. These air strikes may be satisfying, but they won't resolve the conflict. They may make things worse for the region if they lead to confusion and tensions with Russia, or cause civilian casualties. Add to this the domestic US concerns. The air strikes were not authorized by Congress. Obama also launched military action without Congressional approval, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't be concerned about it. And given that Trump was sending

positive signals to Assad earlier, it's hard to know how these strikes fit into his broader policies on the Middle East and Russia.

I am sympathetic to arguments that, in the face of brutality, we must act. I am concerned about the fact that it is Trump acting, however. This is not merely a partisan argument, but comes from one of the tenets of Just War Theory, an ancient school of thought on how wars can be started and waged in a just manner. A war that would otherwise be just requires Right Intention—it must be waged out of a desire for justice, not vengeance or personal gain.

This is admittedly a vague requirement, so I turned to one of the great thinkers in this area, Michael Walzer. In his classic Just and Unjust Wars, Walzer applied Just War Theory to many pressing and ambiguous concerns of modern warfare, including humanitarian interventions (which this arguably falls under).

In Chapter 6 of the third edition, “Interventions,” Walzer discusses humanitarian interventions. He says that humanitarian interventions are “justified when it is a response...to acts ‘that shock the moral conscience of mankind.’” He adds that “any state capable of stopping the slaughter has a right...to try to do so.” Despite my misgivings about Trump and his foreign policy, this would seem to justify his air strikes.

But in a later chapter on “Noncombatant Immunity and Military Necessity” (Chapter 9 in mine), Walzer presents some considerations that would qualify our support for these air strikes. Even the most hawkish neocon would not claim air strikes never cause negative consequences, especially for noncombatants. I think Walzer’s discussion of “double effect” is relevant here. Walzer argues that the complex implications are justifiable under certain conditions, including that “the intention of the actor is good” and that the “good effect is sufficiently good” to justify the negative effects.

This is what Trump critics who theoretically support action in Syria must determine:

- Is Trump sincerely committed to upholding human rights? There is not much evidence for this outside of these air strikes.
- Did Trump think through the implications of these air strikes and their connection to his broader policy? I’m sure military commanders dutifully planned out these strikes, but it is less clear that Trump did. As one critic of Trump’s strikes noted, this raises concerns about his predictability and reliability as a commander in chief.

I think the takeaway for those not categorically opposed to such strikes is, unfortunately, ambiguous. If Obama had launched these strikes I would be more comfortable about them, for the reasons I discussed above. For these strikes we may need to, as Middle East expert Marc Lynch recently did, soberly assess the air strikes’ implications and potential future trajectories. At the same time, we may need to follow warnings of the Cato Institute’s Christopher Preble, that any use of force invites the temptation to escalate, with disastrous consequences.