Praying for Syria

by John Buchanan in the October 16, 2013 issue

A Free Syrian Army soldier

In the late 1930s Germany's Nazi government defied the terms of the World War I treaty and built the largest military machine in the world. Hitler invaded and occupied Poland and was beginning to persecute Jewish citizens. On the other side of the world the Japanese Empire was expanding its territorial boundaries in Southeast Asia.

In the United States, *Century* editor Charles Clayton Morrison, a "pragmatic noninterventionist," opposed American intervention or involvement in either conflict. In editorial after editorial he argued against a military buildup. Reinhold Niebuhr, a *Century* editor at large, thought that Morrison was naive and that nonintervention in the face of clear oppression and palpable evil was irresponsible. Tension between the two escalated until Niebuhr resigned and, in 1941, founded *Christianity and Crisis* to reflect what he called Christian realism. Morrison maintained his position until the Japanese attacked American forces at Pearl Harbor.

I believe that Niebuhr was right: there are times when Christians must stand against evil and oppression; there is a time to take up arms. That said, there have not been many situations that have the moral clarity and urgency of World War II. Most proposed interventions are occasions of moral complexity and incomplete or skewed information about what is happening.

Ever since the Vietnam War, I have been torn between my commitment to Christian realism and an instinct to trust the president and the government on the one hand, and the priority of peacemaking and abhorrence of violence that are essential parts of Christian faith on the other. I trusted the argument that the United States had to intervene when South Vietnam was invaded by North Vietnam. But like other Americans, I became dismayed when I realized that what we were told about the war was not true—and when death counts rose to include more than 50,000 Americans and hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese.

The same tension bedeviled me when President George W. Bush sent American troops into Iraq. I trusted Secretary of State Colin Powell and listened intently when he argued that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction—which turned out to be false.

This time the issue is a dictator's use of chemical weapons on his own people. Who wants to live in a world where that can happen without repercussion? But I'm bothered by the sense that what's happening in Syria is incredibly complex and that a missile strike by the United States might make matters worse.

My denomination's Global Ministries Division reports that Christians in Syria, our partners in mission, are adamantly opposed to American military intervention. They fear more civilian casualties, as well as the possibility that radical Islamists will respond by attacking and killing Christians.

Plans for a strike on the Syrian regime of Bashar Assad were put on hold while the United States and Russia agreed on a framework to secure and destroy Syria's chemical weapons. The two countries are negotiating on a United Nations Security Council resolution to implement the plan. The plan could easily fall apart, however, and if that happens, the United States may act militarily to punish the Assad regime.

I'm on the fence about that option. So I do what those of us on the fence ought to be doing—I pray:

Lord of all people and all nations, your heart must break at all the reasons your children come up with to kill one another. So we humbly pray for the Syrian people caught in this deadly conflict, particularly for those who have lost dear ones. We pray for diplomats who work for peaceful resolution. We pray for the men and women of our armed forces who stand ready, on our behalf, to be in harm's way. And we pray for our president. Give him your grace. Give him wisdom to discern the right path and the courage to follow it. Amen.