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Take away their toys

Phyllis Zagano | Sep. 11, 2013 Just Catholic

Any schoolteacher knows what to do when the boys are playing with matches.

You take away the matches.

Unfortunately, the elites of the international diplomatic community didn't think of that first once Syria simultaneously destroyed thousands of its people and its own reputation with chemical weaponry.

American chest-thumping aside, it now appears everybody's diplomats just want to get rid of the fool things and go back to making statements and having meetings. Yet another conference in Paris to talk about poverty is probably on the horizon.

Nothing -- and everything -- is resolved and exposed. Syria supposedly has 1,000 tons of chemical weapons. Even the French, the staunchest supporters of U.S. military action in the region, would be happy if Russia's proposal to the United Nations actually works. Will Syria turn its chemical weapons over to the international community? No matter which side of the brinksmanship you sit, you want to believe that maybe just this once, no one will fan the flames of war and kill even more people.

For sure, the Syrians won't stop killing each other. With or without chemical weaponry, their internal conflict will not end soon. But with luck, the world's eye may be able to look away from the human tragedy in Syria and get back to watching war's surrogates -- soccer and football.

Syria is a very tough question with religion at its center. The Syrian military and government are controlled by Alawites, a Muslim sect related to Shiite Islam. About 12 percent of the Syrian people are Alawite. Another 10th of the population is Christian, and almost 20 percent are mixed "others." But the majority of the 22.4 million human beings in Syria (about 60 percent) are Sunni Muslims. So the ones in control -- the government and the military -- are essentially Shiite; the rebels are essentially Sunni.

The minority Alawites came into power when a Syrian air force general gained power in the early 1970s. Soon after, the essentially Sunni Muslim Brotherhood began fighting for control. That fire has been sparking for a very long time. The current Syrian president, Bashar Assad, is the air force general's son, and other relations dot the military and political power structure.

The Muslim Brotherhood has had its ups and downs in Syria, and it is connected to the Palestinian Hamas, which in turn has its gun sights on Israel.

The Middle East is a very, very complicated place.

So is Syria in a genuine civil war? Who's the bad guy?

Fingers point to al-Qaida's infiltration of the Muslim Brotherhood, still fighting after all these years. The gun-toters of al-Qaida seem to be the ones who like to shoot people in the head and who, not incidentally, are going

after Christians. One of Christianity's oldest towns -- Maaloula, where they still speak the Aramaic of Jesus -- is now in al-Qaida-spiked rebel hands. There are only 5,000 people living in Maaloula, but rebels have damaged some of the oldest churches and holy sites of Christianity. It is liable to be further wrecked by government forces.

Doesn't anybody care? Doesn't anybody have the nerve to grab those angry 19-year-olds and take away their matches or, in this case, AK-47 assault rifles?

That is what it boils down to, you know: Both Syria and the world in general are overburdened with angry young men whose status begins at the butt end of a rifle and is proved at the other end.

Pope Francis had half the world praying that less, not more, destruction would end the Syrian chemical weapons standoff. At this point, I think the whole world agrees and is saying to the United Nations: Just do it. Take away the weapons. Take away their toys.

[Phyllis Zagano is senior research associate-in-residence at Hofstra University and author of several books in Catholic studies. She will speak Sept. 20-21 at Wisdom House in Litchfield, Conn.; Oct. 13 at Thomas More Chapel of Yale University; and Oct. 23 at Boston College. Her recent books include *Women & Catholicism* (Palgrave-Macmillan), *Women in Ministry: Emerging Questions about the Diaconate* (Paulist Press) and *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future* (with Gary Macy and William T. Ditewig, Paulist Press).]

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