

Interview - Michael Walzer

Written by E-International Relations

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E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, SEP 10 2013

Professor Michael Walzer is one of America's foremost political philosophers and public intellectuals. He has written about a wide variety of topics in political theory and moral philosophy, including political obligation, just and unjust war, nationalism and ethnicity, economic justice, and the welfare state. He played a critical role in the revival of a practical, issue-focused ethics and in the development of a pluralist approach to political and moral life. He has published 27 books and over 300 articles, including *Just and Unjust Wars*, *On Toleration*, and *Arguing About War*. He has served as editor of the political journal *Dissent* for more than three decades, and is a contributor to *The New Republic*. He graduated Summa cum laude from Brandeis University with a B.A. in History, studied at the University of Cambridge on a Fulbright Fellowship (1956–1957) and completed his doctoral work at Harvard, earning his Ph.D. in Government in 1961. Currently, he is working on issues having to do with international justice and the new forms of welfare, as well as on a collaborative project focused on the history of Jewish political thought.

Professor Walzer answers reader questions about intervention in Syria, just war in the age of drones, preventing genocide and mass atrocities, and Israel-Palestine peace negotiations.

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Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in contemporary political theory and moral philosophy?

There has been a remarkable upsurge in writing about just war theory. Years ago, every young philosopher cut his teeth on the theory of punishment—retribution, deterrence, reform, etc.—and then, for some years, it was abortion; and now, it seems to be war. The basic structure of just war theory is at issue, and the debates have been fairly vigorous. But they are debates about the theory, often in technical language and with hypothetical examples, and many of the writers, in my view, don't have much of an interest in the experience of war. There is a growing literature about that experience, especially about asymmetric warfare, but this mostly isn't an academic literature.

Immigration is another issue that seems to be attracting some heated discussion, which is good, because it is an actual political issue. Too much of political theory these days is about political theory. What we should be writing about, always, is politics.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

When I was in graduate school, and for years after that, pretty much everybody that I knew believed in the theory of inevitable secularization. The theory was wrong or, at least, the temporal horizon was wrong. So I have had to think a lot more seriously about religion than I ever expected to do. I have recently been writing about what you might call the cultural reproduction of the secular left. Since I consider myself a secular leftist, I worry about the future of my species. I worry about the rise of militant orthodoxies throughout the Muslim world, in Israel, in India, even in Buddhist countries. I always imagined Buddhism as a peaceful, contemplative, politically passive religion, but that kind of religion hardly makes much of an appearance anywhere these days.

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What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of world politics?

It's a tough life in the academic world today, with many young scholars being forced into a kind of professional proletariat, with adjunct or part-time jobs, limited or no benefits, and little security. Join a union, is my first piece of advice.

But one benefit of unavoidable insecurity is that you might as well take the risk of writing about what you are most passionately engaged with, even if it isn't a subject central to the discipline as it is now defined. Fields like political theory are beset by fashion, but fashions change, so it doesn't make a lot of sense to get stuck with what is fashionable right now. It's better to follow your intellectual instincts and write about what you would like to go on writing about over many years. Students of world politics, it seems to me, should write about what they imagine to be the central issues of world politics (never about methodology or about other people's theories): poverty, environmental degradation, holy wars, military intervention, and so on.

Is the "War on Terror" just? How can just war theory as outlined in your book *Just and Unjust Wars* be used to talk about the fight against non-state terrorism?

The "war on terror" is mostly police work, and the rules of engagement for the police are not the same as for soldiers. We need a political theory of just and unjust policing. For example, you can use drones to kill terrorist leaders in a war zone like Afghanistan, but you definitely couldn't use drones to kill the same people in Philadelphia, say, which is a zone of peace. And what about Yemen, which doesn't fit neatly into either category?

In a war zone, the rules of *jus in bello*, as I describe them or (since there is much controversy here) as other writers describe them, hold exactly as they always have. War should be a combat between combatants, from which non-combatants are shielded. In asymmetric warfare, where insurgents or terrorists hide among the civilian population, an old question has acquired new relevance: how much risk can we ask our soldiers to take in order to reduce the risks they impose on civilians? General McCrystal's new rules of engagement for our army in Afghanistan were criticized by some soldiers, who argued that they asked too much of soldiers, mandating tactics that were too risky. I thought that the new rules were roughly right, but this is, or it should be, a major issue in just war theory today.

Is the idea of just war still relevant in the era of drone warfare?

Of course. The critics of drone warfare are arguing in just war terms, and so are the defenders. Just war theory provides the available language for these debates; I don't know of any other. The critical question is whether the use of drones provides better protection for civilians than other modes of attack, or not. One clear danger is that drones are such an attractive technology that they will be (are already being) overused—that the just war criteria, which should constrain their use, will be (or have been) relaxed. But to make a judgment about overuse or inadequate constraint, you have to know what the criteria are, that is, you have to join the just war debates.

How does the notion of complex equality apply to the practice of formal diplomatic sovereign recognition and legal notion of sovereign equality in international society? Are there spheres of justice that cut across sovereign boundaries?

My book *Spheres of Justice* was an argument about distributive justice, and since there is no global agent of distribution, certainly no agent distributing sovereignty, I don't think that my argument in *Spheres* is relevant to your question. Or, perhaps, it is relevant only in this sense: when people like me defend the idea of national self-determination, we are seeking to promote and justify the existence of political communities that can shape the distribution of social goods among their members and create distinct worlds of complex equality. If a global society and a global economy ever come into existence, with a centralized government, that government would have to make distributive decisions with reference to the meaning or meanings of particular social goods in the lives of its globalized citizenry. But I don't think that we are close to anything like that.

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I suppose you could say that questions about humanitarian intervention are distributive questions—what we are distributing is the protection of human lives. The good is life itself, which is universally valued (I leave would-be religious martyrs out of consideration here), and so the distributive principle should be equality.

You made a case against intervention in Libya. Is there a scenario for the west to intervene in Syria that would qualify as a just war?

If you are thinking of a full-scale military intervention to overthrow the Syrian government, defeat its jihadi opponents, and establish a liberal or social democratic regime, I guess my answer is no, that wouldn't be just. The first and most obvious reason for a negative answer is that success would be radically unlikely, and the prospect of success is a critical criterion for just war. An intervention just to stop the fighting, separate the sides, and begin a negotiation process—that might be justified on humanitarian grounds. An intervention in support of the rebels to balance the intervention of Russians, Iranians, and Hezbollah fighters could be justified in classic John Stuart Millian terms. The aim would be to make sure that the outcome of the civil war reflects the local balance of forces. But an intervention of that sort might well prolong the civil war. An intervention at the last minute to seize the Syrian army's arsenal and prevent the dispersal of its weapons around the Middle East—that would obviously be justified. More than that: it would be criminally insane not to make the attempt.

Short of intervention, what policy options does the US have for interventions in politically complex situations where atrocities against civilians are occurring or likely to occur, such as Syria and Libya?

We have to be clear here. The "atrocities" that justify military intervention are mass killing, or mass rape, or ethnic cleansing on a massive scale. That is not what's happening in Syria. Instead, there is a brutal civil war, with atrocities on both sides. In the beginning, it was clear to people like me that the rebels were the good guys, and so we hoped that they had the strength, the unity, and the popular support to win. But maybe they don't, and then our options are radically limited. We can't supply from the outside the strength and unity that they don't have. So the best thing to do is to try to stop the fighting, to look for a compromise settlement, or (perhaps) to work toward a temporary or permanent partition of the country that reflects the balance of forces in different regions.

Those on the political left have sometimes opposed military interventions on humanitarian grounds, such as in Iraq or Libya. Given that such military interventions are often politically motivated and can have negative unintended consequences for civilian, what kinds of policy options should activists advocate for to stop and prevent genocide and mass atrocities?

When a massacre is going on, as in Cambodia, say, during the rule of the Khmer Rouge, the thing to do is to stop it. Anyone who can, should. Since all political actors have mixed motives, in which self-interest always figures, I would not want to wait for a pure moral will. Obviously, if the consequences of acting will be worse than the consequences of not acting, then one can't act. But massacres can usually be stopped by firm and restrained military action—and then consequences down the road can be dealt with down the road.

Prevention is hard because we are not very good at prediction. But once the killing begins, decisive intervention will prevent many deaths. The head of the UN force in Rwanda thought he could stop the killing very early on, and with a fairly small force. Political will was missing in that case, as in many others. It is always hard to acknowledge, perhaps to recognize, that there really are people whose political aim is mass murder.

What are the prospects for the latest round of US-led peace talks between Israel and Palestine? What will it take for such negotiations to succeed, now or in the future?

The prospects are dim, but that isn't a reason for not pushing hard. Secretary Kerry has shown surprising stamina and forcefulness—and more of both will be required in the coming months. It's just hard to imagine either Netanyahu or Abbas acting with the kind of courage that will be necessary. Neither of them has done anything to prepare their people for the compromises that peace will require.

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The Israelis will have to give up the settlement enterprise and retreat to something close to the 1967 borders, and they will have to accept that these borders will run through, not around, the city of Jerusalem. Actually, if the new borders are then internationally recognized, recognized by all of Israel's neighbors, this "retreat" will be a great victory for Zionism. But that isn't the way it will feel, given the ascendancy of the right, right now, in Israeli politics. And Netanyahu is a man of the right—even though his own party has moved so far rightward, that he is now its most moderate member.

The Palestinians will have to give up the dream of a return to the homes they lost in 1948. They can have a "law of return," like Israel's, but only if the return is to the new state of Palestine. But the refugees in Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon have been kept in camps for over half a century, denied any opportunity for economic or social integration into the countries where they are living. They have been kept in a permanent state of waiting for the destruction of Israel and their triumphant return to Jaffa, Haifa, and all their old villages. So for them the necessary settlement will be a great defeat, for which no Palestinian politician has dared prepare them. It could be described as a victory, too, if it produced the end of the camps and an internationally funded integration into Palestine and other Arab countries. But who is ready to call it that?

A wise man once said to me: Both sides have to be able to call the final settlement a victory. I can imagine leaders who might pull that off, but not these two. And still I cling to the hope that they will rise to the occasion and surprise us all.

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This interview was conducted by Alex Stark. Alex is Features Editor of the website and a director of e-IR's editorial board. She is a PhD candidate in International Relations at Georgetown University.