

THE CONVERSATION

1 October 2014, 5.43am AEST

Moral dilemmas of war against Islamic State lack easy answers

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Air strikes in Syria are the latest phase of the war against Islamic State, each stage involving a fresh set of moral judgements.

Every generation in recent memory has had seminal historical conflicts which demand that lessons must be learnt. The baby boomers had the Vietnam war. Their parents: the second world war. And our generation has had the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Usually the message is elusively simple: “war is hell” and “never again”. But as we delve deeper, we realise the lessons are more nuanced.

The second world war taught us the hideous malevolence of a fascist ideology that was incompatible with basic human dignity and the importance of stopping aggressors in their tracks sooner rather than later.

Vietnam taught us that the historical pre-determinism of a supposed domino effect was no more real than the countervailing Marxist historical pre-determinism; and the importance of being able to distinguish between wars of ideology from wars of national independence.

The Iraq war taught us that pre-emptive invasion of another country is an inherently undemocratic thing for any democracy to do, and that in any case democracy cannot be imposed by force by foreign powers, only encouraged from afar. It taught us to be wary of our leaders’ claims about the reliability of intelligence reports, and that invading another country in contravention of international law and undermining the international rules-based system has real and eventual costs for democracies. Just witness the ever-increasing great power disregard for those rules in the Ukraine, and in the East and South China Seas.

When all else fails, only force is left

And yet the unfortunate reality is that war is still a necessary evil. Some things must be combated by force, because diplomacy has failed, or is too late to chance, or to hope. The Abbott government is expected to confirm very soon that Australian forces will join military operations against Islamic State (formerly ISIS or ISIL) in Iraq.

The impending humanitarian catastrophe at Mount Sinjar, where tens of thousands of Yazidis faced genocidal extermination at the hands of Islamic State jihadists, was such a case of the justified use of force. Our shared and common humanity dictated that those with the power and means to intervene to avert such mass atrocities have a responsibility to do so. This is known as the "Responsibility to Protect".

The response from the United States was textbook in its implementation. Military force was used only as a last resort, and not disproportionate to the threat to humanity. Precision airstrikes in support of the Iraqi-Kurdish Peshmerga ground forces saved thousands of lives.

Proportionality here is critical: we cannot allow ourselves to fall into the trap of 'counter-extermination', bombing Islamic State soldiers into oblivion simply because we can. As much as we despise their fanaticism, the soldiers of Islamic State are human too.

This is the United States at its best, redeeming our hopes for an internationally responsible liberal democracy rather than the flailing and idiosyncratic neoconservative beast of a decade past. It has renewed the world's dreams of the United States as a force for good. And Tony Abbott and his Coalition government have been utterly right to lend Australia's support for these kinds of humanitarian interventions. For this we should be proud.

However, taking military action beyond the defence of purely humanitarian principles is more fraught and ambiguous. Arming the Iraqi Kurds will have longer-term regional implications that cannot yet be fully predicted. We know that Western involvement in arming their chosen side in civil wars has had a mixed record.

Yet, on balance, those longer-term risks cannot overcome the Iraqi Kurds' right to self-defence in the face of Islamic State aggression. By arming the Iraqi Kurds to the point of self-protection, we are acting on that higher priority of preventing future massacres.

Destroying Islamic State is another question



Taking the fight to Islamic State itself for the purpose of defeating the movement is yet another, separate proposition. While the United States and Australia have a certain responsibility for the mess that the Iraqi state has become, this responsibility does not necessarily beget more action. It could well be deployed as an argument for inaction.

Once more, we have unpredictable follow-on effects. Islamic State is now the main organised resistance against the murderous al-Assad regime in Syria.

Would its defeat simply hasten a parallel defeat of the secular moderate rebels? Or would it create a much-needed vacuum for the secular moderates to fill? Would we, after all the sustained yet impotent Western opposition to the brutal Syrian government, simply be doing al-Assad's dirty work for him?



Again, these risks must be balanced against the good that short-term military intervention will do. Whether Western intervention will do “good” must surely turn on whether or not the inherent character of Islamic State is an affront to human rights and human dignity; in short, are they more like the Nazis, or more like the Viet Cong, or Saddam Hussein's Ba'athists?

Are we facing a World War II-style aggressor with a totalitarian ideology, or are they just ideologically loathsome champions for their own self-determination? Or is Islamic State simply a despicable autocracy, which must be tolerated because that is a lesser evil than an ill-conceived, pre-emptive war by the West?

Simple analogies are hopelessly plagued by the actual complexity of history, but they do help us to make sense of the similarly complex moral choices facing our societies when contemplating war. One should not make such comparisons lightly, but Islamic State's lengthening catalogue of massacres and crimes against humanity and its corresponding absolutist and totalitarian ideology make them more like the Nazis than like Saddam or the Viet Cong.

Thankfully, despite the hype, they are not the military threat to broader humanity that the Nazis posed. But unfortunately, once attempts at diplomacy have been reasonably exhausted, and the nations of the world have given their support (especially in the case of Syria, where al-Assad has refused any armed international intervention), their total and unconditional defeat is humanity's only option.

And then, as much as it pains me and hopefully you as peace-dreaming citizens of the world, we must fight them. War *is* hell. But inaction will be far worse.