

In Defence of Just War*

Christian tradition, Controversies, and Cases

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My aim in this article is to show that the Christian just war tradition remains very much alive, continuing to develop as it wrestles with conceptual problems and thinks its way through novel cases. I begin by explaining briefly why I choose to think in terms of the *Christian* tradition. Then I proceed to discuss four controversial issues that my recent book, *In Defence of War*,¹ has raised: the conception of just war as punitive, the penultimate nature of the authority of international law, the morality of national interest, and the elasticity of the requirement of proportionality. Finally, in order to illustrate the interpretation of some of the criteria of just war, and to show how these develop upon encounter with particular circumstances, I consider three topical cases: Britain's belligerency against Germany in 1914, the Syrian rebellion against the Assad regime in 2011, and Israel's Operation Protective Edge against Hamas in Gaza in 2014.

Just war thinking: why Christian?

When I think about the ethics of war I do so in terms of the Christian tradition. Why? Won't this limit its appeal, attracting only the interest of Christians and excluding others? Why doesn't it proceed in secular terms, which are universally intelligible and accessible? Why must it be religious, confessional, sectarian?

There are three reasons. First, I am a Christian. I see the world in Christian terms, and when I come to think about the ethics of war, I naturally do so in those terms.

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¹ Nigel Biggar, *In Defence of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Second, I don't believe in the possibility of secular language. That is to say, I do not believe that there is a set of terms that is neutral between rival worldviews, which members of a plural society should adopt when communicating with each other about public affairs. Nor do I believe that religious worldviews are irrational *per se*, and that public discourse must be non-religious in order to be rational. There is no view from nowhere; there are only diverse confessions. What is more, non-religious views—Aristotelian, Hobbesian, Kantian, Marxist, Nietzschean, etc—are quite as plural and quite as conflicting as religious ones.

How, then, can we communicate, perchance agree? By setting out as candidly and clearly what we think and why; by inviting others to do the same; by engaging in the give-and-take of conversation; by identifying points of agreement; by reasoning together about points of disagreement; and by learning from one another.² I do not doubt that non-Christians will be puzzled by some things that I say, and that they will disagree with others. But I am equally confident that many of them will find much to which they can consent. After all, the common world that we inhabit does rein in the divergence of our construals. What is more, different traditions are seldom *absolutely* strange to one another: certain strands of Christianity and Islam incorporate Aristotle, for example, and both Locke and Kant are more theological than atheist moral philosophers usually care to remember.

In brief, my view of secularity is not that of Jürgen Habermas or John Rawls; it is that of Augustine. In this Augustinian view, secularity is the public space where plural voices put their differences on the table, negotiate, and compromise.

My third reason for thinking about the ethics of war in terms of the Christian tradition is that there is a variety of ways of construing the justification of war, and some are better than others. Some might assume that Christian thought is *passé* and has been surpassed by modern philosophical versions. I don't think so. In my book I argued that David Rodin's critique of Michael Walzer's secular version of just war thinking is pretty damning, but that at the same time it inadvertently illuminates the strengths of the Christian version.³

Further, Christian thinking differs from contemporary moral philosophy on just war in one fundamental respect: it conceives of just war as basically punitive in form. This brings us to the first controversial issue.

² I have written about this at some length in *Behaving in Public: How to Do Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011) and in Chapter 7 and the Conclusion of *Religious Voices in Public Places*, co-edited with Linda Hogan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

³ In *War and Self-Defense* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001) David Rodin offers a critique of Michael Walzer's account of the just war, mainly as expressed in his modern classic, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (London: Allen Lane, 1977). In Chapter 5 of *In Defence of War* I argue that Rodin inadvertently vindicates the early Christian tradition of just war thinking.

Controversies

Just war as punitive

As I see it, one respect in which Christian thinking about just war is ethically superior to Michael Walzer's moral philosophy—at least, as represented by David Rodin—is that it does not take national self-defence as its paradigm.⁴ To make national self-defence *simply* the model of justified war issues in some counter-intuitive judgements: for example, that as soon as the Allies invaded the borders of Nazi Germany, Hitler's belligerency became self-defensive and so justified and the Allies' war-making became aggressive and so unjustified. This conclusion reveals, I think, that to identify justified war with national self-defence is morally simplistic, ignoring questions of motive, intention, cause, and proportion. In contrast, Christian thinking holds that justified war is always a response to a grave injustice that aims to rectify it. This response may take defensive *or* aggressive forms. It may move seamlessly from defence to aggression or it may begin with aggression. Justified aggression is what so-called 'humanitarian intervention' is about. The doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect is, in effect, a reassertion of the classic Christian paradigm of justified war.

This paradigm involves a claim about justified war that is very controversial and arouses quite some alarm: namely, the claim that the basic form of justified war is punitive—even, I would say, retributive. This view is characteristic of Christian thinking at least up to Grotius in the 17th century, and since then in the cases of Jean Bethke Elshtain and Oliver O'Donovan.⁵ Therefore, it is also a major reason why many believe that just war thinking should cut itself loose from its Christian moorings. Why so? Two main reasons are given. First, that to allow just warriors to think of themselves as punishing the enemy is to encourage them to loosen the constraints on how they wage war. And second, that many, perhaps most, fighting on the unjustified side will not be morally culpable and will therefore not be liable for punishment.

My response to the first objection is this. If justified defence is only and always defence against an injustice, it necessarily has the form of retribution. Let me make clear that by 'retribution' I do not mean 'retributivism': I do not mean the ethic that prescribes an eye for an eye, a wasteland of equal suffering. Rather, my meaning derives from the etymology of the Latin verb *retribuere*, that is, a handing or paying back of what is due. So by 'retribution' I mean simply a

⁴ Rodin, *War and Self-Defense*, p. 108: "Michael Walzer calls the analogical argument from self-defense to national-defense the 'domestic analogy', and places it [at] the centre of his theory of *ius ad bellum*". In particular, Rodin refers the reader to Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, p. 58.

⁵ See Biggar, *In Defence of War*, pp. 163-4, including n.82.

hostile reaction to an injustice. All punishment has this basically retributive form.

The question of what purposes one wants to achieve through one's hostile, retributive reaction remains open and is yet to be determined. It could be one or more of several ends: defence, deterrence, or ultimately reform and reconciliation. In Christian eyes, the end or goal of punishment should never be the suffering of the unjust perpetrator *for its own sake*. Justified war, therefore, is retributive in its basic form, but not retributivist in substance. It is a hostile reaction to injustice, but it does not aim simply to make the perpetrator suffer for its own sake.

The difficulty that many people have in describing justified war as retributive is, I think, an expression of a general cultural tendency to equate punishment and retribution with retributivism, and to see it therefore as a form of vengeance meted out by the self-righteous. In Christian eyes, however, punishment and retribution should only ever be meted out by one group of self-conscious sinners upon another, and if it is to be just punishment, it cannot be vengefully retributivist but must aim at defence, deterrence, and eventual reconciliation. Accordingly, it *must* be proportioned to those ends, and it *must* suffer such constraints as that proportion imposes.

What about the issue raised by the second objection, namely, the liability of soldiers fighting in an unjust cause? The first thing I want to say is that, while an element of tragic fate often characterises the predicament of a soldier fighting in an unjust cause, that does not relieve him of responsibility or excuse him from culpability. Take this example. At the German military cemetery at Maleme in Crete there is a permanent exhibition (or at least there was twelve months ago). This tells the story of the three von Bluecher brothers, the youngest still in his teens, who were all killed in the same place on the same day in May 1941 during the battle for Crete against British, Australian, and Greek troops. How did they all end up there? The two younger ones hero-worshipped the oldest—as younger brothers often do—and when he joined the parachute regiment, they followed. In the past I have used this to illustrate the element of tragedy that attends even the actions of unjust warriors, arguing that we should regard them with a measure of sympathy. One does not have to agree with what these three young men were doing falling out of the sky onto Crete in May 1941, in order to share a sense of sadness at their untimely deaths and a sense of common human fatedness. Nevertheless, a friend of mine who fought with the Royal Ulster Constabulary against the I.R.A. during the most violent phase of the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland, and who is less inclined to sentimentality than I, has challenged me not to assume the three brothers' innocence. It is, after all, quite possible that they

were convinced Nazis and that they had participated in atrocities elsewhere in Europe. Certainly, after landing on Crete German paratroops were involved in some brutal reprisals against civilians.

My second comment on the issue of the liability of unjust soldiers is to say that, in the absence of the possibility of more precise discrimination, it seems to me reasonable for the just warrior not to give benefit of doubt and to presume guilt. The reasons for this are threefold: first, unjust soldiers sometimes do actively support the cause for which they fight; second, unjust soldiers who do not support it always have the option, albeit costly, of refusing to fight; and third, to require just soldiers to make very discriminate moral judgements on the battlefield would be to render the waging of just war practically impossible. For sure, this does make war *rough* justice—but rough justice is still justice, and all human justice is more or less rough.

International law as penultimate authority

The second controversial issue raised by my version of just war is its view of international law as a *penultimate* authority. On the one hand, respect for the authority of international law is very important. Why it's important is made memorably clear in a passage of Robert Bolt's play, *A Man for all Seasons*, where Sir Thomas More argues in favour of affording the benefit of law even to the Devil himself, so as to maintain the general security that the rule of law provides. The context finds More being urged by his daughter, Margaret, and his future son-in-law, Nicholas Roper, to arrest Richard Rich, an informer:

Margaret (exasperated, pointing to Rich): While you talk, he's gone!

More: And go he should if he was the Devil himself until he broke the law!

Roper: So now you'd give the Devil benefit of law!

More: Yes. What would you do? Cut a great road through the law to get after the Devil?

Roper: I'd cut down every law in England to do that!

More: Oh? And when the last law was down, and the Devil turned round on you—where would you hide, Roper, the laws all being flat? This country's planted thick with laws from coast to coast—Man's law's, not God's—and if you cut them down—and you're just the man to do it—d'you really think you could stand upright in the winds that would blow then? Yes, I'd give the Devil benefit of law, for my own safety's sake.⁶

I do think, therefore, that sometimes one should tolerate a measure of injustice out of respect for the law. I also think that respect for the authority of law is very important for international trust, and that any state proposing to bend (or, less

⁶ Robert Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons* (London: Heinemann, 1960), pp. 38-39.

likely, break) the law should still show it the respect of making a case before the U.N. For that reason, I think that the Blair government's attempt to secure a second U.N. Resolution on Iraq in March 2003 was absolutely right, and far better than the Bush government's barely concealed contempt for the U.N. So in the absence (probably fortunate) of a global state, and in order to stave off international anarchy, I certainly affirm the authority of international law.

Notwithstanding that, the question of what actually *constitutes* international law is a controversial one. Is it simply what is written in treaties or does it also embrace customary law as expressed in state-practice? And how should different bodies of law relate to one another? Should the battlefield be governed by the Laws of War or by International Humanitarian Law? When lawyers pronounce, "International law says this" or "Under international law that is illegal", we ought not to be over-impressed. They are behaving as advocates, behaving politically, pushing a particular point of view. If they were more honest and less political—or more academic and less lawyerly—they would claim, "International law says this or that, *according to my interpretation of it*". There is more than one reasonable view of what international law is and what it says.

What is more, a Christian monotheist is bound to acknowledge that positive international law, whatever it is, cannot have the last word. This is because, like any moral realist, he assumes that there is a universal moral order that transcends national legal systems and applies to international relations even in the absence of positive international law. He believes that there are human goods and moral obligations that exist in and with the nature of things, and which exercise a guiding and constraining moral authority long before human beings articulate them in statutes or treaties. He holds that the principles of moral law are given or created before positive laws are made. Legal statutes and social contracts are therefore not crafted in a primordial moral vacuum. They are born accountable to a higher, natural law, and their word is neither first nor last. If that were not so, then Nuremberg was nothing but victors' vengeance dressed up in a fiction of 'justice', and today's high-blown rhetoric of universal human rights is just so much wind.

One thing that this implies is that military action can sometimes be morally justified in the absence of, and even in spite of, positive international law. Therefore, Christian just warriors cannot join those who believe that the 'legitimacy' of military intervention to prevent or halt grave injustice is decided simply by the presence or absence of authorisation by the United Nations Security Council. Loath though lawyers are to admit the penultimate nature of the authority of positive law, they do, when pressed. Writing of NATO's 1999 intervention in Kosovo, Martti Koskenniemi has admitted that "most lawyers—including myself—

have taken the ambivalent position that it was both formally illegal and morally necessary”.⁷

It seems to me that it is possible to break the treaty-letter of international law, while making a serious case that one is acting within its spirit; and that, insofar as other nations are persuaded, the authority of the law will not be damaged. What is vital is to assure the international community that one remains bound by common norms, even when one’s reading of them is controversial. If the manner of literal transgression is respectful, the law’s authority can be saved and international trust maintained.

The morality of national interest

Third, controversy attends my view that national interest is not necessarily immoral. In the popular Kantian view of ethics, self-interest is regarded as an immoral motive.⁸ According to this view, therefore, where national interests motivate military intervention, they vitiate it. There is, however, an alternative and, I think, superior eudaemonist tradition, which found classic expression in Thomas Aquinas. Combining the Book of Genesis’ affirmation of the goodness of creation with Aristotle, Thomist thought does not view all self-interest as selfish and immoral. Indeed, it holds that there is such a thing as morally obligatory self-love. The human individual has a duty to care for himself properly, to seek what is genuinely his own good. As with an individual, so with a national community and the organ of its cohesion and decision, namely, its government: a national government has a moral duty to look after the well-being of its own people—and in that sense to advance its genuine interests. As Yves Simon wrote, “What should we think, truly, about a government that would leave out of its preoccupations the interests of the nation that it governs?”⁹ This duty is not unlimited, of course. There cannot be a moral obligation to pursue the interests of one’s own nation by riding roughshod over the rights of others. Still, not every pursuit of national interest does involve the committing of injustice; so the fact that na-

⁷ Martti Koskenniemi, “‘The Lady Doth Protest Too Much’: Kosovo and the Turn to Ethics in International Law”, *The Modern Law Review*, 65/2 (March 2002),” p. 162

⁸ The ethics of Immanuel Kant are usually held to be simply ‘deontological’, viewing the only truly moral act as one that is done out of a pure sense of duty or reverence for the moral law. So conceived, the truly moral act stands in stark contrast to a merely prudential one, which seeks to promote the agent’s interests. Whether this common, deontological view of Kant fully captures his thought I doubt. I think that a better reading has him argue that truly moral acts are those where the duty of justice as fairness disciplines—rather than excludes—the pursuit of interest.

⁹ Yves R. Simon, *The Ethiopian Campaign and French Political Thought*, ed. Anthony O. Simon, trans. Robert Royal (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2009), p. 55.

tional interests are among the motives for military intervention does not by itself vitiate the latter's moral justification.

This is politically important, because some kind of national interest needs to be involved if military intervention is to attract popular support; and because without such support intervention is hard, eventually impossible, to sustain. One such interest can be moral integrity. Nations usually care about more than just being safe and fat. Usually they want to believe that they are doing the right or the noble thing, and they will tolerate the costs of war—up to a point—in a just cause that looks set to succeed. I have yet to meet a Briton who is not proud of what British troops achieved in Sierra Leone in the year 2000, even though Britain had no material stake in the outcome of that country's civil war, and even though intervention there cost British taxpayers money and British families casualties.¹⁰ Citizens care that their country should do the right thing.

The nation's interest in its own moral integrity and nobility alone, however, will probably not underwrite military intervention that incurs very heavy costs. So other interests—such as national security—are needed to stiffen popular support for a major intervention. But even a nation's interest in its own security is not simply selfish. After all, it amounts to a national government's concern for the security of millions of fellow-countrymen. Nor need it be private; for one nation's security is often bound up with others'.

So national interest need not vitiate the motivation for military intervention. Indeed, some kind of interest will be necessary to make it politically possible and sustainable. It is not unreasonable for a national people to ask why they should bear the burdens of military intervention, especially in remote parts of the world. It is not unreasonable for them to ask why *they* should bear the burdens *rather than* others. It is not unreasonable for them to ask why *their* sons and daughters should suffer and die. And the answer to those reasonable questions will have to present itself in terms of the nation's own interests. And it could and ought to present itself in terms of the nation's own morally legitimate interests.

The elasticity of proportionality

The fourth controversial aspect of my version of just war thinking comprises my view of the proportionality of military action. To be justified, war must be 'proportionate'—both before it is launched and in the waging of it. The best sense that I can make of proportionality is elastic and permissive. This permissiveness troubles me, but I can see no rational way of tightening it. One conceivable way of tightening it is to think of proportionality as a state of affairs that can be seen

¹⁰ The British casualties were very light: one dead, one seriously injured, and twelve wounded (<http://www.eliteukforces.info/special-air-service/sas-operations/operation-barras/>, as at 24 November 2009).

to obtain when a cost-benefit analysis shows an excess of goods over evils. My problem with this is that, while it may be conceivable, it is not possible. This is because such cost-benefit analysis falls prey to the incommensurability of the relevant goods and evils. That is, the relevant goods and evils are so radically different in kind that this is no common currency in which to measure them: they are *incommensurable*. So, for example, how does one weigh against each other, on the one hand, the goods of regime-change in Berlin in 1945, the liberation of Europe from fascism, and the ending of the Final Solution against, on the other hand, the evils of 60-80 million dead and the surrender of eastern Europe to the tender mercies of Stalin? In a nutshell, bare human life and political justice are not the same kinds of thing: so how many instances of the former are worth sacrificing to achieve the latter? If there is an answer to this question, it cannot come in the form of a numerical calculation.

Take another example. Some years ago, the B.B.C. dramatised the memoirs of a Battle of Britain pilot, Geoffrey Wellum. At the end of the dramatisation, the real, ninety-year old Wellum appeared, looking out over the iconic white cliffs of the southern English coastline. And as he gazed out to sea, he said, “Was it worth it? Was it worth it? All those young men I fought and flew with? All those chaps who are no longer with us? I suppose it must have been. I am still struggling with that”.¹¹ Now, did Wellum mean that he doubted that Britain should have fought against Hitler in 1940? I do not think so. Rather, I think he was giving voice to the truth that the loss of each life is an absolute loss, for which there is no compensation. I think that “Was it worth it?” is the wrong question, because there is no sensible way of answering it. Such a ‘weighing up’ of goods and evils cannot be done. Were it possible, proportionality could be determined with some precision. Since it is not possible, proportionality is more elastic.

Nevertheless, there are other concepts of proportionality that do make sense to me. One such concept is the aptness of means to ends—or, in the case of disproportion, the inaptness. Thus for NATO to have gone to war against Russia in 1956 to save the Hungarians, or in 1968 to save the Czechs, or perhaps even in 2014 to save the Ukrainians, and to risk world-destroying nuclear war, would have been to undercut its goal—a free and flourishing Hungary, Czechoslovakia, or Ukraine. Thus, too, to engage in military operations that result in large-scale civilian deaths, when a vital part of the counter-insurgency strategy is to win civilian hearts and minds, would be self-subverting and in *that* sense disproportionate

¹¹ Matthew Whiteman, director, “First Light” (London: B.B.C., 2010). This film was based on Geoffrey Wellum’s memoir, *First Light* (London: Viking, 2002).

Cases

From discussing some of the controversial issues raised by my understanding of just war I move now to present some topical and illustrative instances of its application, which involve two of the six criteria of *ius ad bellum* (just cause and last resort) and one of the two criteria of *ius in bello* (proportionality).

Britain's belligerency against Germany, 1914

Had you been living in Britain since 2014, the centennial anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War, you would be aware that historians disagree about who to blame most for the escalation of war in 1914 from its Balkan beginnings into a continental and then global conflagration. Until very recently, a dominant consensus endorsed the thesis of Fritz Fischer that Berlin was primarily responsible. This view prevailed even among German historians. In the past two years, however, Christopher Clark's, *The Sleepwalkers*, has challenged this consensus. Clark concludes his account of the outbreak and escalation of the war by saying that "[t]here is no smoking gun in this story; or, rather, there is one in the hand of every major character.... the outbreak of war was a tragedy, not a crime".¹² "The crisis that brought war in 1914", he tells us, "was the fruit of a shared political culture", which rendered Europe's leaders "sleepwalkers, watchful but unseeing, haunted by dreams, yet blind to the reality of the horror they were about to bring into the world".¹³

I am not persuaded by Clark's argument, not because of its history, but because of its ethics. I think he draws too sharp a distinction between tragedy and crime, as if they are always mutually exclusive alternatives. Crime often has a tragic dimension. Human beings do make free moral choices, but our freedom is often somewhat fated by forces beyond our control. In addition, Clark assumes that because blame was widespread, it was shared equally. I disagree. The fact that blame's spread is wide does not make it even.

With regard to the particular issue of whether Britain's entry into the war on 4 August 1914 had just cause, which is the most basic of the justifying criteria, a moral judgement has to be made about Germany's decision to invade Belgium, Luxembourg, and France, because without that invasion Britain would not have fought.

So why did Germany invade? She invaded because she feared that France would attack in support of Russia. According to just war reasoning, however, the mere threat of attack is no just cause for war. Only if there is substantial evi-

¹² Christopher Clark, *Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London: Penguin, 2013), p. 561.

¹³ Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, p. 562.

dence that a threat is *actually in the process of being realised* would the launching of *pre-emptive* war be justified. It is not justified to launch a *preventative* war simply because one fears that an enemy *might* attack. In August 1914 France was not intending to attack Germany (and nor, of course, was Belgium). Indeed, France deliberately kept one step behind Germany in her military preparations so as to make her defensive posture unmistakable, and as late as 1 August she reaffirmed the order for her troops to stay ten kilometres back from the Franco-Belgian border.¹⁴ Notwithstanding this, Germany declared war on France on 3 August on the trumped-up pretext that French troops had crossed the border and French aircraft had bombed Nuremberg.

It was the German government, dominated by its military leadership, which launched a preventative war against France and Belgium in August 1914. Why did they do it? Because, as social Darwinists they took it for granted that war is the natural way of deciding the balance of international power; because they foresaw that the longer the next war was delayed, the longer would be the odds against Germany's victory; and because (to quote David Stevenson) "the memory of 1870 [the Franco-Prussian War], still nurtured through annual commemorations and the cult of Bismarck, had addicted the German leaders to sabre-rattling and to military gambles, which had paid off before and might do so again".¹⁵

Clark's metaphor of the 'sleepwalker' is a powerful one, which picks out important features of the situation in the run-up to the outbreak of world war. But a metaphor is, by definition, always both like and unlike the reality it depicts, and shouldn't be taken literally. Germany's leaders were not actually sleepwalkers, but fully conscious moral agents, making decisions according to their best lights in a volatile situation of limited visibility. In such circumstances, which are not at all unusual, error was forgivable. Not so forgivable, however, was their subscription to the creed of a Darwinist *Realpolitik*, whose cynicism about human motives owes more to Thomas Hobbes's anthropology than to Charles Darwin's science, and which robbed their political and military calculating of any moral bottom line beyond that of national survival through dominance.

It is perfectly natural for a nation not to want to see diminished its power to realize its intentions in the world. But if social Darwinism thinks it natural for a nation to launch a preventative war simply to forestall the loss of its dominance,

¹⁴ Hew Strachan, *The First World War*, vol. 1: *To Arms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 91. See also Stevenson, *1914-1918: The History of the First World War* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 30.

¹⁵ Stevenson, *1914-1918*, p. 596.

Christian just war reasoning does not think it right. Just cause must consist of an injury, be it actualised or actualising, and Germany had suffered none.¹⁶

Rebellion in Syria, 2011

Under Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafiz, the Syrian regime was populated largely by members of the Alawite minority, dominated by the military and security forces, and secured and enriched itself through the patronage of business. It was also fiercely repressive of dissent, holding that it alone stood between peaceful order and anarchy—not least that which would ensue, if Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood were ever to get their hands on the levers of power. Upon Hafiz al-Assad's death and his son's election to the presidency in 2000, there was some hope that Bashar would pioneer both economic and political reform, and indeed he gave some early signals that these hopes would be met.

However, when in 2011 symptoms of the 'Arab Spring' began to blossom in Syria, the regime reflexively reverted to its customary, repressive mode. In the first week of March 2011 ten children in Deraa, aged between nine and fifteen, wrote an anti-regime slogan (probably more anti-corruption than pro-democracy) on the wall of their school. For this misdemeanour the Syrian authorities had them arrested, sent to Damascus, interrogated, and apparently even tortured.¹⁷ On 15 March a few hundred protesters, many of them relatives of the detained children, began protesting in downtown Deraa. Their ranks swelled to several thousand. Syrian security forces, attempting to disperse the crowd, opened fire and killed four people. The next day the crowd ballooned to about 20,000. On 23 March, according to reports, the security forces killed at least a further fifteen civilians and wounded hundreds of others. President Assad subsequently refused to punish the governor of Deraa, his cousin.

I have described the evolution of events in some detail, in order to make clear that the Syrian rebellion was originally an act of non-violent protest against arbitrary and ruthless state coercion. Only when it became clear that the state was unrepentant, and that its very centre was prepared to *own* the arbitrary repression by refusing to repudiate it, did peaceful protest develop into armed rebellion. Assad's refusal to dismiss the governor of Deraa and his blaming the

¹⁶ The full version of my analysis of Britain's belligerency in the First World War can be found in Chapter 4 of *In Defence of War*.

¹⁷ David W. Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 2013), pp. 55-6. Most of what I know about the modern history of Syria and its current politics I owe to Lesch's book. Is Lesch a reliable guide? Judging by the plaudits extracted from reviews in the *Financial Times*, *International Affairs*, and the *Times Literary Supplement*, it would seem so. By his own account he met regularly with Bashar al-Assad from 2004-8 and had meetings with high-level Syrian officials until well into 2013 (*Syria*, p. vii).

unrest on external interference made it clear that the oppression was essential, not accidental, to the regime. Since March 2011, of course, the regime has confirmed and deepened the indiscriminate ruthlessness of its determination to eliminate opposition by its very probable use of chemical weapons and its certain use of barrel-bombs.¹⁸

Given this history, it seems to me that the armed uprising in Syria did have just cause as an act of self-defence against injustice that was not merely grave, but systemic. Why is this significant? Because the *systemic* commitment of the regime to the grave injustice implies the improbability of peaceful, political reform and confers on the resort to armed rebellion the status of ‘last resort’.¹⁹

Israel’s Operation ‘Protective Edge’ against Hamas in Gaza, 2014

It is clear, both in morality and in international law, that Israel had a right to defend her citizens against indiscriminate killing by Hamas’s rockets in 2014. It is not so clear that her recent self-defence was proportionate, either in the sense of ‘strictly necessary’ or in the sense of ‘instrumentally apt to the end’.

Provided that Israel targeted enemy combatants and that such targeting was necessary, there is no upper limit to the number of civilian casualties that may have been incurred, tragically, as ‘collateral damage’. Let me make the point by reference to another case. When the Allies invaded Normandy seventy years ago, their bombers killed 35,000 French civilians. This was undoubtedly terrible and tragic. But if we think that Allied success was worth 35,000 civilian deaths, can we say that it wouldn’t have been worth 70,000 or 170,000? If we are judging simply by numbers, I do not think that we can. Provided that the military means chosen are necessary, there is no absolute maximum to the collateral damage that may be incurred.

However, we should interrogate the claim of necessity by asking about its end: To what end are the chosen military means necessary? If it is to fend off of harm to Israeli civilians, then Israel’s ‘Iron Dome’ missile system had already

¹⁸ The Assad regime, backed by its ally, Russia, did not deny that chemical weapons were used, but pinned culpability on the rebels. At the time of writing (September 2013) there was no proof positive either way. Nevertheless, there were strong circumstantial reasons for attributing the use to the state—including the requisite delivery systems. Indeed, according to the London *Times* (13 September 2013), United Nations inspectors were expected to report that munitions casings found at the scene of the crime pointed to an origin in the state’s forces. Moreover, notwithstanding his manifest reluctance to intervene in Syria, and his consequent interest in giving Assad benefit of whatever plausible doubt, President Obama appeared quite convinced that the regime is responsible. So was the French government, which is not famous for being Washington’s poodle. For a summary of earlier occasions of the use of chemical weapons, in which the Syrian regime might be implicated, see: www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-22557347.

¹⁹ A fuller version of my just war analysis of the Syrian rebellion can be found in “Christian ‘Just War’ Reasoning and Two Cases of Rebellion: Ireland, 1916-21, and Syria, 2011-present”, *Ethics and International Affairs*, 27/4 (Winter 2013), pp. 393-400.

achieved that with, according to her own officials, ninety per cent efficiency. It is arguable, of course, that complete defence must extend beyond deflecting the harmful effects to uprooting their cause. This would justify military action against Hamas.

Still, if the end is to uproot the cause of attacks on Israel, then military means alone do not suffice. Military means alone, then, are not apt. While the bombardment of Gaza did weaken Hamas's military power, it did not uproot it. Without a political solution, Hamas will simply revive to fight again.

It was within Israel's power to take diplomatic, confidence-building initiatives. Unilaterally, she could have stopped and reversed the illegal settlements in the West Bank. Since she didn't do so, her military assaults on Gaza were inapt and therefore disproportionate.

Now, of course, my moral analysis here depends on a certain reading of the political and diplomatic facts, with which you may disagree. But even if you don't agree with the illustration, you might still accept the point of principle it seeks to illustrate: that the proportionality of military means depends on their relationship to other, non-military parts of a political strategy.

Conclusion

It is often claimed that just war thinking has been overtaken by events—that it has been rendered obsolete by novel phenomena such as nuclear weapons, wars 'among the people', war-by-remote-control, and cyber-aggression. My presentation of issues and cases here has, I hope, been sufficient to show that just war thinking continues to develop, as it always has, by wrestling with controversial conceptual problems and thinking its way through novel sets of circumstances. The tradition of just war thinking is still very much alive, and with regard to the discriminate moral assessment of war it has no rival.

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