

ISIS, a monster made by moralists from the West. By **Brendan O'Neill**, editor of *spiked*.
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The West weeps over the Yazidi people, yet is responsible for their suffering. or Western observers and politicians to fashion a black-and-white morality tale out of the current mayhem in Iraq takes chutzpah to new heights. For these people, these individuals now posing as good guys keen to 'save Iraq', these clamourers for the return of Western military forces to Iraq to rescue the Yazidi people and the Kurds from a genocide at the hands of ISIS, bear ultimate responsibility for the mayhem they're weeping over. They created it, they inflamed it. ISIS might be doing the killing, but the space in which ISIS could rise and gain influence was provided by Western forces, by the Western invasion of Iraq and Western intervention in Syria. To listen to the very facilitators of ISIS's emergence now say that 'we', the good and the powerful of the West, must stand firm against this new 'Islamofascist threat' is almost too much to stomach.

It is striking how speedily the nightmare in northern Iraq has been squeezed into what has become a familiar moralistic script. It is all very simple, we are told: on one side there is a marauding gang of people who, according to a writer for *The Times*, are 'very like' the Nazis; and on the other side there are the terrorised Yazidi people, denounced by ISIS as 'devil worshippers', and the Kurds, bravely trying to hold back the tyrannical ISIS tide. And into this squaring-off between evil and innocence, we, the 'defenders of democracy and human rights', must intervene to destroy a 'genuinely evil force', says one newspaper. We must wage a 'battle for civilisation', says a UK Labour peer, and face down ISIS, the 'greatest threat to peaceful co-existence that exists in the world'.

As a snapshot of what is unfolding in northern Iraq, described last week on *spiked* as 'horrifying', these descriptions seem plausible. ISIS is indeed a profoundly unpleasant organisation, made up of a mixture of intolerant theological extremists, morally warped Westerners who think beheading infidels will give them a sense of direction in life, and disgruntled Sunnis who want to strike hard against the Shia rulers in Baghdad. And the Yazidi people in particular do indeed face a mortal threat from ISIS, having been expelled en masse from their towns in northern Iraq simply for possessing allegedly infidel beliefs. Their suffering on Mount Sinjar, to which they have fled, is, by all accounts, immense. And yet at the same time, something very important is missing from this snapshot, from this self-aggrandising depiction of the crisis in northern Iraq as a 1939-style question mark hanging over every decent Westerner, asking him 'will you combat fascism or will you appease it?'. And that is the backstory, the antecedents to this hellishness, the question of how this crisis came about, the issue of how much moral responsibility is borne by the self-styled anti-fascist, pro-interventionist observers of the West for the very 'fascism' they are now posturing against and defining their inherent goodness in relation to.

Very little in life is black and white. There is always grey. And the dark grey hanging over the crisis in northern Iraq, a grey which very few want to look at, far less analyse, is the fact that ISIS's rise is a consequence of something simultaneously more mundane and more concerning than evil – it's a product of Western intervention, and more importantly of new forms of Western intervention built more on an emotionalist desire to 'Do Something' (about evil) than on any kind of clear-headed, *realpolitik*-informed analysis of what might be in the best interests of the West or of global stability and order.

There are two ways in which the West's handwringers over the fate of the Yazidi people facilitated the rise of ISIS. First, the Western invasion of Iraq destabilised the careful political equilibrium in that nation, allowing the emergence of political and sectarian tensions which had been held relatively in check for a significant period of time. Through removing the political system that had cohered Iraq's various disparate ethnic and religious groupings, without replacing it with anything of substance that might have allowed the Iraqi state to consolidate itself in a new way, Western interventionists set in motion a lethal dynamic that led in the mid- to late 2000s to a civil war between Sunnis (influential under Saddam) and Shias (the rulers of post-Saddam Iraq). The seemingly apocalyptic crisis in northern Iraq is in many ways a continuation and also a terrifying extension of this post-invasion unravelling of the Iraqi order: it continues the Sunni-Shia conflict facilitated by the West's invasion, with ISIS representing, in part at least, the latest manifestation of Sunni fury with 'the anti-Sunni policies and actions of [the Baghdad government]'; and it also expands the post-invasion disorder into other communities, exposing and exploding tensions between Kurds and Sunnis, between Kurds and Shias, and between Islamists and small religious communities like the Yazidi. Behind the mayhem in northern Iraq, there's a larger story about the lethal folly of casually removing state structures and state institutions in divided, fragile nations, as the West did to Iraq in the 2000s.

And the second way Western interventionists created the space for ISIS's rise was through their thoughtless destabilisation of Syria. One of the great political myths of recent times is that the West did not intervene in Syria's civil war; it did, and in the process it provided a massive political and military boon to ISIS. Over the past three years, Western leaders and diplomats worked hard to delegitimise the Assad regime - that is, the state structures holding Syria together - and to create new post-Assad zones in Syria that would be ruled by Western-sponsored and Western-financed proto-governmental forces. And it is in these parts of Syria, these areas in which Western powers conspired to remove the writ of the Syrian state and replace it with new well-funded but ultimately flimsy institutions, where ISIS has been able to assume power and gain both weaponry and experience. As an enlightening analysis in *Foreign Policy in Focus* points out, ISIS did not actually win its territory in Syria by taking on the comparatively mighty Assad regime but rather through conquering these 'political vacuums' nurtured by Western intervention, where it was the fact that the new post-state structures were so lacking in legitimacy and authority that 'allowed ISIS to take over so easily'. And once they did, they gained much of the equipment and finances that the West had pumped into these vacuum-like, post-Assad zones.

In short, the phenomenon of ISIS is fundamentally a consequence of the West's destabilisation of Iraq and its interventions in Syria; of its thoughtless undermining of the state and military institutions that had cohered two vast and fragile nations in the Middle East for decades, an undermining which unleashed civil and sectarian conflict in Iraq, exacerbated the civil war in Syria, and directly cultivated new stateless spaces in which a self-consciously map-redrawing group like ISIS could flourish. As we listen to the horrifying reports of what is currently being done to the Yazidi people, let us do more than shake our heads in horror: let us also ask who made such a hellish situation possible in the first place.

But that's the problem: analysis is frowned upon in modern-day foreign-policy debates. Indeed, the 'Something Must Be Done' lobby, the 'Do Something' campaigners for Western intervention overseas, actively discourage and even demonise political scrutiny of the complex causes of global conflicts. Today, as we have seen everywhere from Bosnia to Darfur, to respond to a foreign crisis with anything other than emotional handwringing, with anything more than a cry of 'Take Action', is to run the risk of being branded an apologist for evil or

even a genocide denier. Such are the terms used to ostracise those who dare to say that things might be more complex, and more our fault, than the simplistic media and political posturing against 'New Nazis' would have us believe. The anti-intellectualism of the 'Do Something' brigade is astonishing: it castigates analysis and demands simply action; it demonises academic rigour and allows only the expression of an emotional desire to strike against evil, to hit the bad guys; it treats any discussion of the potential long-term consequences of Western action as cowardice, and holds up its own demand for action as decent and honourable. But this is the opposite of the truth.

'We owe it to the Yazidi people to *do something!*', the interventionists cry. Actually, we owe it to people like the Yazidi, and other inhabitants of unstable nations, to be more intellectual and less emotional; to debate more, to analyse more, to think carefully about the potential impact of our interventions rather than simply shout: 'Do it!' For the Yazidis, about whom Westerners are currently saying 'Something Must Be Done', are themselves the victims of the politics of 'Something Must Be Done' and its deployment in Iraq in 2003 and Syria more recently. Their current suffering can be traced directly to the self-conscious evacuation of analysis and strategy from Western foreign policy and their replacement by a lethally infantile moralistic urge to 'Do Something'.

The situation in northern Iraq is dire. *spiked's* position is this: emergency humanitarian aid must continue to be delivered, and we won't particularly lose sleep over the emergency American airstrikes against ISIS positions, to the extent that they might in the extreme short term allow the safe fleeing of people under threat. But no long-term or medium-term solution can come from Western intervention, because Western intervention is the ultimate author of the nightmare in northern Iraq. Do something? You already did something; you did this, you made this horror.