

Politicians and radicals are addicted to the politics of fear. By Brendan O’Neil, Editor Spiked, 4 October 2014.

At a glance, it looks like Britain is politically riven over the question of whether to bomb Iraq. On one side are the pro-interventionists: the vast majority of MPs (524 voted for military action, against 43 who opposed it); various military talking heads; and the iPad imperialists of the media set, who hope that some RAF assaults on the Islamic State will provide them with the vicarious thrill of defending Enlightenment values against sixth-century-style backwardness. And on the other side are the anti-interventionists: those 43 MPs; the anti-war movement; and a healthy smattering of commentators talking about ‘quagmires’ and ‘repeating the mistakes’ of 2003.

But look a little closer, and it becomes clear that there is no chasm-like ideological divide between these two groups. We are not witnessing any great clash of ideas or values in relation to Iraq, between Empire-builders on one side and principled anti-imperialists on the other. On the contrary, what is most striking about the Iraq debate, or non-debate, is that both sides speak in exactly the same language: the language of fear. Both the justifications put forward for attacking IS and the arguments against it have been underpinned by the politics of fear, confirming that this low, base playing on panic, this appealing to people’s emotional uncertainties, is now the only political game in town.

One of the key arguments offered by the pro-bombing side is that if we don’t attack IS in Iraq, then there will be more terror on our streets. They will come here and kill us. IS is ‘planning to attack us here at home’, says PM **David Cameron**. Backing him up, Labour leader Ed Miliband described IS as ‘**a threat to the UK**’. In parliament, the 524 MPs who gave the nod to the RAF assaults did so on the basis that this military action is about ‘**protecting the streets of Britain**’. That term — ‘the streets of Britain’ — was splashed across much of the pro-intervention media coverage, with newspapers warning darkly of IS bringing ‘blood to the streets of Britain’.

Strikingly, on the eve of the decision-making in London and Paris over whether to bomb IS, the Iraqi prime minister said he had **seen plans** by IS to launch ‘attacks in the metros of Paris and the US’. This cynically timed intervention by a leader very keen for Western fighter planes to weaken the Islamic State became a key feature of political commentary in favour of Western action. It added a sense of urgency to the claim that if we don’t bomb IS positions now, then IS sympathisers will plant bombs in our communities in the very near future.

This has been a common feature of the ‘war on terror’ of the past decade: the marshalling of the politics of fear to try to drum up support for military action overseas. Where once the authors of war might have sought to appeal to nationalistic sentiment, even to feelings of jingoism, or simply to a belief that our cultural way of life is worth fighting for and possibly even exporting, now they appeal to feelings of insecurity, to today’s free-floating sense of peril. From Afghanistan in 2001 to Iraq today, the justification for war has been consistently fear-based. It’s been built on the notion that tiny groups of men, possibly even ‘lone wolves’, pose a mortal threat to our daily existence, and that often the threat is invisible and noxious: think of all those anthrax, smallpox and sarin terror scares promoted during the anti-terror decade of the 2000s. Their argument is essentially: ‘Support this war or you will be in permanent peril, on the Tube, on the bus, everywhere.’

It's important to note that this use of fear isn't a calculated, cynical ploy by politicians — rather, they themselves feel genuinely fearful, and are possessed of a powerful sensation that society, and their grip on it, is spinning out of control. The appeal to fear to try to legitimise war speaks to the profound political disarray of modern Western societies. In the absence of any overarching ideals today, our leaders try to nurture at least an acquiescence to war, if not a cheering for it, through tapping into the individual and social angst of the twenty-first century. Bereft of any strong belief in traditional Western values, and relativistically reluctant to assert the superiority of the Western way of life, politicians keen to intervene overseas instead fall back on the one political script that has purchase in our highly individuated, uncertain era: the culture of fear. They end up promoting war, not as a cause that might unite a nation, but as something that might manage and lessen individual feelings of fear. We are called on to support war as hyperindividuated creatures at risk, not as members of a collective with values to defend and promote. And of course this backfires, for it intensifies the culture of fear and creates the kind of social sentiment that has traditionally come *after* war: feelings of moral exhaustion.

And on the other side, anti-war people also fall back on fearmongering to push their cause. Their key case against bombing Iraq is that it will infuriate IS activists and sympathisers and encourage them to assault us here at home. One Labour MP said bombing IS won't make Brits safer — it will '**probably make them more vulnerable**'. The **Stop the War Coalition** said Western intervention against IS will 'increase the security threat to the UK'. Among anti-intervention commentators, all the talk is of how bombing IS will make life worse for *us*. It won't tackle the threat IS poses to the 'streets of Britain', says a *Guardian* writer; it will '**make it worse**'. Other observers cite the claims of **terrorism analysts** at King's College London, who on Friday said that MPs, by voting to bomb IS, had 'moved the frontline from Syria and Iraq to Britain' and we will now see 'attacks on home soil'.

Here, too, all evidence of political principle has been elbowed aside in favour of appealing to fear. Where our rulers tell us that failing to bomb IS will increase the threat to British individuals, their opponents say that it's the bombing of IS that will make our lives riskier. The anti-war side also seems bereft of ideals, preferring instead to use fear to try to get people agitated, or at least depressed, about the war. This isn't principled anti-imperialism, built on a substantial critique of modern Western interventionism and solidarity with its true victims (which is not us, by the way, but various peoples in Iraq and Syria); rather it is a self-protection racket, appealing to a selfish desire for impermeable safety in everyday life. This is why the anti-war movement's favourite slogan is the narcissistic 'Not in my name' — because it's about encouraging a highly individuated fear and disgust with risky wars, rather than cultivating a true, ideas-fuelled movement to analyse and challenge modern military interventionism.

So what we have is not a battle of ideas over Iraq, IS and war, but a fight among fearmongers. We need urgently to inject some principles into the debate about war and terrorism. We need to wean both politicians and radicals off their addiction to the politics of fear, which divides rather than unites and treats the public as emotionally unstable individuals to be panicked rather than as political beings to be engaged.