

Is 'just peace' possible in Iraq?

Thorny postwar issues: Thorny postwar issues

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For centuries, Christianity's theory of "just war" has helped religious and political leaders determine when, if ever, war is justified and how to conduct a moral military campaign. Now, as the U.S. prepares to reduce troop levels in Iraq this summer and in Afghanistan next year, the 1,500-year-old theory is being deployed on a less-familiar mission: ending the wars ethically.

Ethicists and theologians believe that just war theory has much to offer in guiding U.S. strategy, but hewing to its insights could add numerous challenges, particularly in regard to the withdrawal from Iraq.

In April, leading just war theorists gathered at Georgetown University to consider thorny postwar issues, including refugees and lingering political and religious unrest.

Eric Patterson, assistant director of Georgetown's Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs, said the challenge facing ethicists and policy makers is "why we have a peace deal, [yet] we can't seem to root an enduring peace."

One reason is that the secular authorities and institutions responsible for leaving a war zone "haven't thought deeply enough about some of the moral and ethical issues . . . That leads right back to just war," Patterson said. Policy makers are now finding that the same theory that some of them used to justify the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq now holds them to uncomfortably high standards upon exit.

Since just war includes a duty to reconcile and rebuild, the U.S. has incurred a lengthy list of unfulfilled obligations in Iraq, said Tobias Winright, associate professor of moral theology at Saint Louis University. Responsibilities include cleaning up munitions sites and submitting to the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court, which could lead to Americans being on trial for war crimes, he said.

Applying just war concepts to an Iraq exit plan means that Americans are going to be held accountable for things that they are morally responsible for, said Winright, coauthor of a forthcoming book on postwar justice—what theorists call “jus post bellum.” In an effort to envision jus post bellum, scholars are identifying the relevant principles in a tradition that stretches back to the ancient worlds of St. Ambrose and St. Augustine. At the same time, they face the challenge of prioritizing competing principles.

For example, Michael Walzer of the Princeton-based Institute for Advanced Study invokes the protection of innocents as a central tenet of just war. When extended to a post conflict environment, he said, this tenet means coalition forces must leave Iraq in relatively stable condition. The tenet would also compel the U.S. to provide sanctuary for Iraqis who cooperated with the U.S. and its allies.

“One of the crucial principles of ‘in bello’ [during war] justice is to minimize the risks you impose on the civilian population,” said Walzer, author of the books *Arguing About War* (2004) and *Just and Unjust Wars* (1977). “And you have to do that when you’re getting out also.”

Others say leaving a stable Iraq is important but note that justice involves a delicate balancing act between competing goods. For David DeCosse, editor of a 1992 book reflecting on the morality of the Persian Gulf war, the just war principle of “rights vindication” means Iraqis are entitled to inherit an environment that lets them determine their own destiny.

Yet at some point, others note, autonomy for Iraqis may require foreign powers to pass down a less-than-stable situation. “The Iraqis have made it clear that a major U.S. military presence should end,” said James T. Johnson, a just war expert at Rutgers University. “And we have to accept that, even if the society is not yet in as good a shape as would be desired.”

In Winright’s view, secular doctrines based on international law have lost sight of a crucial principle for all stages of war: “right intent.” That principle obligates war-making regimes to conduct and conclude war for one specific purpose, namely, to “restore a just and lasting peace.”

When that sense of purpose is lost, he notes, wars are waged for lesser causes or can simmer in perpetuity. In leaving Iraq, he argues, America must embrace and interpret the idea of “right intent” anew—or risk being haunted for decades by an

unjust end to a controversial war.

“If we are going to embark on just wars,” Winright said, “then hopefully this [jus post bellum] category will really give nations pause to think about . . . not just, ‘How do we go into a war?’ or ‘How do we conduct a war?’ but also, ‘How are we going to end it in a way that’s just?’” -G. Jeffrey MacDonald, *Religion News Service*