New Blackfriars

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Comment: *Negative Consequences*

Back in 1991, Pope John Paul II appealed to President George H.W. Bush not to authorize military action to clear the Iraqi invaders out of Kuwait. Many people, perhaps most, including Catholics, did not side with the Pope. Then, in 2003, the Pope appealed to President George W. Bush not to invade Iraq. Addressing the Vatican diplomatic corps on 13 January 2003 the Pope declared: "War is never just another means that one can choose to employ for settling differences between nations", reiterating that "war cannot be decided upon . . . except as the very last option and in accordance with very strict conditions". Two months later, on 16 March 2003, in his Angelus message, he declared that all options had not been exhausted: "There is still time to negotiate; there is still room for peace, it is never too late to come to an understanding and to continue discussions". The American-led invasion of Iraq began two days later, on 18 March 2003.

The Pope did not drop his opposition to the war once it had started. On the contrary, on 4 June 2004, after Saddam Hussein had been hunted down though not yet hanged, the Pope reminded President Bush, visiting him at the Vatican, of "the unequivocal position of the Holy See". Perhaps what the Pope kept saying sounded like textbook just war theory, too abstract and academic for the President to take seriously. In the April 2003 issue of *30giorni*, the colourful Italian magazine (discontinued in 2012), the then Cardinal Ratzinger, supporting the Pope's stance, argued that "reasons sufficient for unleashing a war against Iraq did not exist", explicitly because "proportion between the possible positive consequences and the sure negative effect of the conflict was not guaranteed. On the contrary, it seems clear that the negative consequences will be greater than anything positive that might be obtained". Ten years later, few would quarrel with that bleak assessment.

Actually many people saw that from the outset. As *Tablet* readers would know, from a decade of reliable reports in one of the few journals with sustained interest in the matter, leaders of the ancient Christian churches in the region repeatedly warned that, whatever about Saddam's weapons of mass destruction (as non existent as Iraq's links then with 9/11), let alone about installing pro-American democracy, the intervention in Iraq was always certain to destabilize the Middle East. It was not that President Bush and his team were unaware of the law of unintended consequences. They were warned but did not listen. Hundreds of people well informed about things in

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that part of the world, diplomats who had served there, journalists who had reported from there for years, historians and scholars, almost unanimously cautioned against western, and especially American and British, military adventurism, 'crusader' and 'Christian' as it would be perceived; but such advice was no more heeded than the appeals by the Vatican (of course backed by intelligence from people on the ground).

With the fighters of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), overrunning large regions of Syria and Iraq, it is not only the local Christians who are under threat. On the contrary, as Sunnis, they do not hesitate to kill Shia Muslims. They are a serious threat to the existence of Israel. Ironically, Iran is the only state in the area with the authority and power to overthrow them. So far, however, since they occupied Mosul in June 2014, they have sought to exterminate the Christian communities that have lived there for almost 2000 years. Christians are faced with converting to Islam, paying a heavy tax, or being "put to the sword". Amid systematic desecration of churches and destruction of Christian cultural artifacts and shrines, individual Christians have every reason to fear being beheaded or crucified if they offer resistance.

In short, however appalling life was under brutal and arbitrary dictatorships, the ruling elites were secular, western-orientated, and quite tolerant of religious minorities, especially indigenous Christians. One consequence, unintended though not unpredictable, of the American-led war against Iraq turns out to increase the likely extinction of Christianity in the Middle East.

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