

Israel at War: Charting the Contours of a Developing Crisis

Week 6: Fighting a Just War, In Theory

February 14, 2024

On the morning of October 7, 2023, the 50th anniversary of the 1973 War in which Arab states blitzed Israel on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, Hamas militants from the Gaza Strip fired a deadly barrage of rockets into the nation state of Israel, while sending gunman, mobilized assault units and even hang gliders into the southern Israeli territory. Armed terror groups entered Israel and infiltrated military bases, towns and farms, shooting civilians and taking hostages. One such attack was upon a music festival near the Israel-Gaza border, which emergency responders said left at least 260 dead. Israel has not seen this kind of infiltration since town-by-town fighting in the 1948 war of independence.

The day after the attacks, the Israeli government formally declared war with PM Benjamin Netanyahu vowing a “mighty vengeance” on Hamas. Since that day Israel is at war on land and in sky to protect its citizens, clear its land of terrorists and recover hostages taken into the Gaza. Israel therefore must walk the fine line of waging a war of retribution and not revenge. Yet still, accusations of injustice have been made by both Israel and Hamas. To what extent then can we determine: Is this a just war?

God and War

Dwight Eisenhower said, “War is a grim, cruel business, a business justified only as a means of sustaining the forces of good against those of evil.” (let the reader understand) Though our world is broken, we are still moral beings, among moral consequence and absolutes. And where there is evil, there will be war. Based upon in the intrinsic value of human life (Genesis 1:27) along with a right function of government (Romans 13:1), it is understood that war can be waged justly (consider the morality of Romans 3:26). Sovereignty and sanctity mean responsibility for the common good, giving states moral footing to defend itself against enemies foreign and domestic.

Just War Theory

Tertullian, Origen, Clement opposed the idea of Christians serving in the military and thus engaging in war (largely due to their view of the state at that time). However, things change with Constantine connecting church and state. Whereas a government bears the responsibility to protect its people, universally banning Christian combatants would not be accepted. How then would Christian engage in military defense, therefore justifying a declaration and waging war, whereby sending young men and women into battle to kill and be killed?

Augustine (354-430 AD) in his book *The City of God* provided some help. He laid a foundation of what would later become known as “just war theory.” Love demands we serve our neighbor, and sometimes that means using violence to stop the killing or enslaving of the innocent, he would argue. His premise: All wars are evil. And yet, there are certain occasions to engage in such warfare to stop the aggressor. Augustine brings two main issues in play: “What justifies going to war,” and “how can a government (and its combatants) conduct a war in a just way?” It was not until the Middle Ages with Thomas Aquinas’ (1225-1274 AD) *Summa Theologica* that a doctrine of just war would be systematized, providing clarity and expression to Augustine.

Three Conditions of Just War (Thomistic)¹

1. *jus ad bellum* (the moral requirement for going to war)

Only principled authorities can declare war. Their cause must be defense of the common good, recovery of something wrongly taken, punishment of evil doers. Further their intention must be righteous and virtuous with a view of making peace, with a high probability of success, and the acknowledgment that all other preventative measures have been exhausted.

2. *jus in bello* (the moral requirements for waging war)

There must be a distinction between combatants and civilians, along with fair treatment of prisoners. Attacks must be out of military necessity while maintaining a sense of *proportionality*. As violence is not a “good” in itself, but rather means to a good of saving lives and promoting justice. Though violence may be used, it is not the goal. Disablement, not the destruction, of the enemy must be the first priority of conscience. There ought to be no “malum in se” (evil in essence) in military intention, as even in violence one must maintain morality.

3. *jus post bellum* (moral requirements after warfare is concluded).

Here is the most recent requirement to be added to the just war tradition. Its concern is with the victor’s obligations after obligations upon victory, assuming they were not the aggressor.

Fighting in the Gaza Strip

Palestinian deaths help the image of Hamas and discredit the reputation of Israel. Human shields are therefore used to compromise Israel’s moral position. However, when non-combatants are used, military engagement must pass at least three tests: Take action to minimize civilian deaths; notify civilian population of the attack to come, maintaining military superiority; enable civilians to escape before the attack.

Jesus on War

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus taught us to “not return evil for evil,” and “turn the other cheek.” (Matt. 5:39) Though he practiced nonviolence in his ministry and mission, he did not teach it as a general Christian principle (as he wage a war to end all wars, Rev. 19:11). Thus, Christians historically have based just war theory less to the Sermon on the Mount, and more so to the role and of the civil responsibility of the civil magistrate (Rom. 13).

Discussion questions:

1. Though all wars are evil, does that mean that all participants are evil? Do those who fatally wound enemy combatants break the sixth commandment? What classifies a conscientious objection? (Consider Mennonite and Anabaptist traditions)
2. How do we justify the “take no prisoner” (Cf. Joshua 6:21) type of destruction of Israel’s warfare with a Christian moral ethic? How should we understand the Crusades?
3. How does just war theory inform our understanding of personal defense, and/or the aid of the abused, or positions on capital punishment?

¹ Most modern just war criteria includes the following: it is waged as a last resort; declared by a legitimate authority; with the intention to redress a wrong suffered; with a reasonable chance of success and minimal casualties; with the ultimate goal of a just war is to re-establish peace; the violence used must be proportional to the injury suffered; and the weapons must discriminate between combatants and non-combatants. See also: Joe Carter, “A Brief Introduction to the Just War Tradition: *Jus ad bellum*” (August 17, 2017) at erlc.com