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Beware the Beating Drums of War

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Photograph: Chris Radburn/PA

Over ten years ago, Tony Blair spoke to Parliament on the eve [of the vote on the Iraq War](#): “the outcome of this issue will now determine more than the future of the Iraqi people. It will determine the way Britain and the world confront the central security threat of the 21st century.”

The Iraq War has indeed determined how the UK and the world deal with the security threat of terrorism: bombs and rhetoric. Earlier this week, the United States started a bombing campaign against ISIS, the terrorist group that calls itself the Islamic State. Today, after a long debate in Parliament, the UK has decided to follow suit.

We live in times of nebulous, permanent insecurity, where we rely on the words of political leaders to tell us whether or not we are safe. Barack Obama tells us that [there can be no reasoning with this brand of evil, this network of death](#). David Cameron says that this is about [psychopathic terrorists that are trying to kill us](#). Senior EU officials [warn that a major terrorist attack is inevitable](#). Michael Fallon, the Defence Secretary, [cautioned that this campaign could last for years](#). But this is not a new campaign. It is the so called war on terror of over a decade ago. We have been here before. We have been here for a long time.

The humanitarian situation in Syria and Iraq is unsustainable. But as a justification for the latest round of military intervention, we are told of the 500 British citizens and around 3,000 Europeans have gone to fight in Syria; we worry and speculate over the British accent of the ISIS militants appearing on YouTube. [Coming as it does on the heels of a long campaign of highlighting the ISIS threat to the UK](#), the suspicion is that this latest round of bombs has very little to do with humanitarian aid.

Are bombs the best way to fight ISIS, let alone the best way to help the people of Syria and Iraq? It is difficult to say when we are not presented with alternatives. All we have are the words of elected officials immersed in a culture of secrecy. And just like a decade ago, there is a lack of public scrutiny on the nature of the threat. We are told that to release detailed information on the threat from ISIS would damage national security. This creates what Gareth Peirce ([2012, p10](#)) calls the dangerous circularity of national security:

“Deference is fed in part by ignorance, and ignorance is fed in turn by claims that secrecy is essential.”

This deference and ignorance in turn creates what Rosa Brooks [irreverently calls a state of threatiness](#), where we cannot articulate why something is a threat, or offer evidence to back up our claims.

But in a ‘state of threatiness’, we remain in the dark. And the dark is a dangerous place to be if you care for human rights. In the dark, we believe in the false dichotomy constructed between liberty and security. Countless human rights violations have taken place during this war. Abu Ghraib, water-boarding, enhanced interrogation, sensory deprivation are words that should be imprinted in our minds. [There are still over 100 prisoners in Guantanamo Bay, and at least 30 of them are on a hunger strike. Over a dozen of those on hunger strike have been force-fed. Over 4,000 people have been executed](#) without a trial in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia under the CIA Drone Programme. And after all this time, we still have not had a functioning Torture Inquiry in the UK.

All of us who care about human rights, and about the humanitarian crisis in the Middle East should be wary of inflated threats that are not subjected to scrutiny. And we should have no doubt that the war that started so many years ago is nowhere close to ending. After eleven long years, we remain in the dark, hearing the beating drums of war, whilst our government keeps holding its finger to the dam, hoping that it won’t burst and engulf us all.

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