

Innocent civilians are all around us, it seems. Google the phrase and 1.2 million references come up. When a bomb goes off in London or a skyscraper is brought down in New York, or a shell hits an apartment block in Gaza, everyone is quick to claim for their own side the status of righteous victims and to damn the killers as the worst kind of criminals. Though, if non-combatants on the other side are killed, they ‘probably deserved it’, or at best are euphemised as ‘collateral damage’.

Since the Second World War, it has been widely accepted (if only in principle) that it’s a crime even to threaten violence against people who are not members of the armed forces and who are not engaged in hostilities. The various conventions and treaties with which most countries have bound themselves were in part an attempt to lift humankind out of the moral depths we had descended to by the mid 1940s.

By the end of the war, even though the outcome was hardly in doubt, civilians were being bombed without mercy. In the last few weeks of fighting in Europe, Dresden was incinerated. Six months later, the destruction of Hiroshima was timed to ensure maximum loss of life. ‘War is barbaric,’ said Stalin (who was something of an authority on the subject), ‘but using the A-bomb is a superbarbarity.’

Attempts to civilise war seem to many people absurd – and yet they have had some success. Ironically perhaps, some of the earliest rules were made by a Muslim, in what we regard as ‘the Dark Ages’. The first Caliph, Abu Bakr, told his army: ‘You must not mutilate dead bodies. Don’t kill a child, or a woman, or an old man. Don’t do harm to the trees, or burn them with

fire, especially those that bear fruit. Don’t kill any of the enemy’s flock, except for food.’

Today, though, such ideals seem hopelessly naive. Even if we were minded to be as careful of the lives of non-combatants – which we are certainly not – we would still have to deal with the reality that now even children could be carrying explosives, and an orchard could conceal a rocket-



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launcher. In this asymmetric world, our foes may not have the same scruples as we do. Their fighters – irregular, unconventional, wearing no uniforms – seem to us to be nothing but terrorists. Then again, our soldiers – just doing their jobs – may strike them as nothing but mercenaries.

In the West, we live in the tension between the principles of total war established in the first half of the Forties and the better way that was agreed thereafter. In Vietnam, new depths were plumbed –

Agent Orange is still crippling and killing people horribly, three generations on – and yet it was the outrage caused by the suffering of civilians – not least, the girl who was photographed fleeing naked and terrified from a napalm attack – that helped to bring the fighting to an end.

The doctrine of total war strips civilians of protection because it maintains that it is not only soldiers who are engaged in hostilities but everyone on ‘the home front’ who supplies, supports and sustains them, both physically and psychologically. Perhaps that’s why we try to bolster the word ‘civilian’ with the adjective ‘innocent’. But that word, too, is suspicious. If people in the East and the South have just cause against Western governments and corporations, perhaps their grievances *ought* to extend to the voters and taxpayers, investors and consumers who give those governments and corporations the authority, the means or the licence to act as they do. Boycotting Nestlé and marching once in a while with a placard saying ‘NOT IN MY NAME’ may not be quite enough to exonerate us.

To find people who are, beyond question, entirely innocent civilians, arguably you have to go to a place where only the armed forces and those who control them have any power at all, such as Burma. Or maybe Afghanistan. Or North Korea.

And there’s the final rub, because that is the country that always comes up when anyone asks why Britain still has its super-barbaric Tridents. We need them, goes the popular wisdom, so that if ever Kim Jong-il attacks us with a weapon of mass destruction, we can do some ‘collateral damage’ in return!

Abu Bakr must be turning in his grave. □