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EDITORIAL:
"Evil by Commission" in International Relations

Dark events such as the Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide, Srebrenica, the Cambodian genocide, Japanese war crimes, the Rohingya crisis, and the 2003 invasion of Iraq—though differing in scale—all transcend the bounds of humanity. These events, categorized in political philosophy and International Relations (IR) theory as genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, or "crimes of aggression," are referred to as "evil" in various ancient beliefs and legends.

The term "evil" or "crime" does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, it originates from specific theological traditions, adopted by moral philosophy, and subsequently entered the vocabulary of politics and International Relations studies (Jeffery, 2007). Throughout this journey, its meaning has shifted, expanded, narrowed, and was sometimes misused. An event labeled "evil" by one nation might be viewed as a holy struggle by another. A leader labeled a "devil" by a foreign media outlet can become a national hero in his own country. In other words, evil is not a fixed category but has a history, undergoes evolution, and is multidimensional (Haddock, Roberts, & Sutch, 2012; Jeffery, 2008).

In moral philosophy, "evil" in the narrow sense is used to describe acts that are extremely heinous and morally repugnant, committed by human agents, including

individuals, groups, or organizations (Frederick, 2018). Frederick distinguishes between natural evil (natural disasters) and moral evil caused by the active actions of humans or other agents, such as genocide, murder, rape, theft, fraud, and coercion in its various forms.

In the field of International Relations, the concept of evil goes beyond mere violations of conventional law or ordinary criminal acts; rather, it is rooted in profound moral and existential dimensions (Rengger & Jeffery, 2005). This phenomenon is systematic, planned, and institutionalized within state policies, rather than being spontaneous individual acts, with a scale of mass destruction targeting specific ethnic groups, populations, or civilizations. Perpetrators often conceal these crimes behind false legitimization, framing such actions as sacred, necessary, or an absolute necessity to evade responsibility. The impact of evil is transgenerational, leaving behind inherited physical, social, and ecological trauma, and involves systematic dehumanization that reduces victims to numbers, objects, or mere threats.

The discussion of evil in International Relations, as represented by Jeffery and Vetlesen, has paved the way for understanding collective evil through the lens of human agency on a transnational scale. Vetlesen (2005) defines evil as an act that intentionally causes suffering to another human being, against the victim's will, and results in serious and predictable harm a definition that emphasizes the perpetrator's active actions. Jeffery (2008) defines evil not as a supernatural force, but as a profoundly human phenomenon characterized by acts of extreme cruelty, deep suffering, and violations of basic human dignity.

The main discourse in the literature on evil highlights the essential nature of malicious intent. The context of IR studies reveals the complexity of the answer to this question. The first perspective asserts that evil requires a conscious intent to inflict suffering; without it, an act is categorized as a policy failure or a tragic mistake, not a crime (Rengger & Jeffery, 2005). Conversely, Arendt's concept of the banality of evil posits that mass crimes are often committed by ordinary individuals without personal intent. Such actions constitute mere bureaucratic compliance, shifting the locus of evil from the individual agent to the system (Arendt, 1963).

The subject or agent of evil (individual evil) can manifest in various forms, ranging from individual leaders (such as Hitler or leaders of invading nations), field operatives (soldiers or torturing contractors), to bureaucratic actors who merely "follow orders" (Ainle, 2008). Furthermore, collective entities such as states (e.g., Nazi

Germany, the U.S./U.K. in Iraq, Russia in Ukraine) and military alliances (such as NATO) are also categorized as subjects of evil. Institutions (the CIA, private contractors) and structured systems (apartheid, state security bureaucracies, the UN Security Council veto) are also included (Vetlesen, 2008). All these entities are classified as subjects of evil because they possess the capacity to command, commit, or facilitate criminal acts.

Objects of evil refer to those who suffer as a result of evil, with humans as the primary targets—whether individuals, oppressed groups, communities, or future generations bearing the long-term consequences. The environment can also become an object of evil if it is intentionally destroyed during a conflict. Although states or institutions are often metaphorically referred to as victims, it is actually the people within them who endure physical and psychological suffering (Ainle, 2008; Vetlesen, 2008). Distinguishing between the object of evil (the victim) and the subject of evil (the perpetrator) is crucial to prevent the distortion of facts, uphold accountability, and ensure accurate analysis of international crimes. However, in practice, the subject and object of evil (the crime) can switch roles. A soldier who tortures is both the subject of the evil act and the object trapped within the system. Similarly, a state that was initially the object of colonization can turn into the subject of evil when committing new crimes. Thus, this distinction is merely a theoretical approach to facilitate analysis, not a reflection that reality on the ground is absolutely divided.

The past three decades, particularly following the 9/11 attacks, have seen the resurgence of the term “evil” in the international political arena, exemplified by George W. Bush’s “Axis of Evil” rhetoric directed at Iraq, Iran, and North Korea (Hayden, 2014). This narrative was then countered by the targeted nations by labeling the U.S. as the “Great Satan” (Singer, 2004). Donald Trump used “evil” to describe foreign threats such as ISIS, Islamic terrorists, and criminal organizations (Rech, 2021). This phenomenon has not yet been fully addressed by academic literature in International Relations, which tends to be theoretical-philosophical or merely explores discourse. What is rarely done is developing a systematic analytical framework to study evil as an object of scientific inquiry.

In developing an analytical framework, it is important to distinguish between two ways in which evil manifests in international relations. The first is “evil by commission,” which refers to wrongdoing brought about through the active actions of an agent, consistent with the concept of moral evil as outlined by Frederick (2018) and

Vetlesen (2005). Examples include illegal invasions, torture, rape as a weapon of war, public deception, and the use of toxic weapons. The second way is "evil by omission," which refers to crimes resulting from a failure to act when an agent has both the capacity and the duty to do so. Examples include failures in humanitarian intervention, failures to protect civilians, and failures to provide medical aid in conflict zones. "Evil by commission" is relatively easier to prove, as it suffices to demonstrate that the agent performed a specific action. Conversely, "evil by omission" is harder to prove because it requires demonstrating that the agent possessed the capacity, duty, and knowledge of the crime taking place, yet still chose not to act.

Both of these focuses or approaches are equally important and differ in the analytical frameworks they offer. However, if one focuses solely on "evil by commission" in a systematic manner, the framework is constructed by posing three fundamental questions. First: with what is the crime committed? This question leads to an analysis of instruments—specifically, material (weapons, money, written law, infrastructure) versus non-material (narratives, stigma, fatwas, gaslighting). Second: where is the impact of the crime felt? This question leads to an analysis of the locus—that is, the physical (the body and the environment), the socio-normative (institutions, beliefs, and legitimacy), or the psycho-symbolic (identity, meaning, and trauma). Third: which spheres of life are affected? Based on a review of various cases of international crimes, from the Holocaust to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, seven impacted areas can be identified that consistently emerge as the locus of suffering: normative (systems of values and international law), discursive (the production of narratives and public lies), psychological (mental health and trauma), ecological (the natural environment), gender (violence based on the social construction of sexuality), religious (desecration of religious symbols and institutions), and epidemiological (population health and the distribution of disease). With this framework of three questions, "evil by commission" is no longer merely a moral term, but can be studied systematically, empirically, and critically. These seven affected areas are then examined. Each reveals the unique ways in which material and non-material instruments inflict harm, as well as the specific sites where that harm settles.

The Normative Dimension

The normative dimension within the "evil by commission" framework refers to the active undermining, manipulation, or destruction of the systems of values, morals, and laws that underpin the international order, including the UN Charter, international humanitarian law, human rights declarations, and unwritten norms such as the responsibility to protect (R2P) or the prohibition of aggression (Randhawa, 2022; Thomas, 2001; Coady, 2008). The uniqueness of the normative dimension lies in its systemic and transgenerational impact. A single act of norm violation by a major power can erode the legitimacy of the entire international legal system for decades.

Material instruments here refer to the physical means through which norm violations are carried out. Such actions are evident in the arbitrary use of the veto by powerful states to block resolutions on aggression (Lang, 2007). Additionally, there are practices of forcing constitutional or international treaty changes upon other states under the threat of sanctions (Bâli, 2023). Violations also occur through the physical destruction of legal capacity, such as the bombing of courts and archives in Iraq (2003). Finally, there is manipulation of UN resolutions through economic pressure so that the resulting clauses are ambiguous, thereby legitimizing unilateral actions or those beyond the original mandate (Vincent, 2014).

Non-material instruments operate by inverting moral logic, making acts of violation appear as if they were forms of enforcing norms. Wilde (2018) cites the construction of the "enemy of humanity" (hostis humani generis), such as narratives portraying Iraqi leaders as monsters, thereby stripping them of their right to protection under the Geneva Conventions (Hammond, 2007). This argument parallels the framing of the invasion of Yugoslavia (1999) as a human rights rescue mission (Hammond, 2007). Furthermore, the U.S. doctrine of pre-emptive strikes (2002) has established a new norm that undermines the post-1945 principle of non-aggression (Hameed, Dar, & Shahid, 2025). This tactic is supported by efforts to undermine the credibility of international courts (International Criminal Court, UN Security Council) and the use of exceptionalism narratives, which grant superpowers special rights to disregard international law (Nymalm & Plagemann, 2019).

The normative dimension's impact is evenly divided into two main loci according to Hinnebusch (2006). The socio-normative locus plays a dominant role, undermining global legal institutions (UN Security Council, International Criminal Court,

International Court of Justice), diminishing the legitimacy of norms, and eroding the trust of small states, particularly following the 2003 invasion of Iraq. On the other hand, the psycho-symbolic locus influences the perceptions of elites and the public, fostering cynicism that international law only binds weak states. In this dimension, physical damage to court buildings is viewed as a material instrument aimed at undermining the enforcement of norms (Hinnebusch, 2006).

The Discursive Dimension

Evil by commission operates through the discursive dimension by actively creating misleading narratives. Unlike the procedural, normative aspect, discourse is more oriented toward the production of false discourses (statements/symbols). This form of evil is purely non-material; its essence lies in the manipulation of meaning, not in physical instruments. Consequently, this leads to a distortion of collective memory and the legitimization of violence in the psychological-symbolic realm (Kaufman, 2019).

Material instruments play a minimal role as physical means of conveying messages, not as the source of the crime itself. For instance, fictitious documents, fabricated physical evidence for international trials, and audio/video recordings with edited contexts are merely tools supporting the false narrative. This also includes the distribution of physical propaganda materials (leaflets, posters, textbooks) aimed at instilling dehumanization. Essentially, these physical instruments possess no inherent malice without the accompanying manipulative narrative.

The core of the discursive dimension lies in non-material instruments that demand in-depth analysis. This manipulation operates through several methods: first, planned public lies, such as false claims of weapons of mass destruction, presented as truth. Second, creating an inhuman "enemy" narrative to justify violence, for example through the label "axis of evil" (Tabbert, 2013). Third, delegitimizing criticism by labeling it "irresponsible." Fourth, state gaslighting, which involves denying concrete evidence, such as denying the existence of torture (Melissen, 2005). Finally, normalizing violence through terms like "collateral damage" and false narratives that portray perpetrators as heroes rather than the cause of victims' suffering.

Discursive crimes target the psychological-symbolic aspect as the locus that directly influences collective beliefs and the legitimization of violence. The authorities' narrative regarding an "imminent threat" can shift public attitudes from doubt to pro-

war, even implanting false historical memories such as referring to an invasion as "liberation." Meanwhile, the role of verification institutions (parliament/media) as social-normative loci tends to be secondary and optional, often failing to function due to compliance with executive narratives. Because it operates in the cognitive realm, this dimension lacks a physical locus (Colaguori, 2010).

The Gender Dimension

The gender dimension of "evil by commission" disproportionately targets individuals based on their gender roles and sexuality. These crimes target not only women, but also men and non-binary individuals, such as through rape in prisons or forced sterilization. Its distinctiveness lies in the perpetrator's use of gender as a strategic tool to divide communities or destroy morality, resulting in a dual effect: the physical destruction of the individual alongside psychosocial harm, stigma, and the breakdown of social bonds within the victimized group (Jones & Lower, 2023).

Gender-based material instruments are physical means that directly harm the body or systematically restrict women's access. These include physical sexual violence, such as rape, genital mutilation, and forced sterilization, which are used as weapons of war (e.g., the "uterus cleansing" campaign in Bosnia from 1992 to 1995) (Buss, 2009). Additionally, restrictions on access include the curtailment of reproductive health services in conflict zones or bans on education and employment for women (e.g., Taliban policies). Coercive medical interventions, such as forced pregnancy or abortion, are also employed to alter ethnic composition (documented in Bosnia, Rwanda, and Nigeria) (Adeyanju, 2020).

Gender-based non-material instruments perpetuate violence and protect perpetrators through discourse and social constructs. The discourse of "honor," for instance, frames women's sexual purity as a group's self-respect, leading to rape victims being blamed or ostracized (Enloe, 2000). In the military sphere, toxic masculinity views the bodies of enemy women as "spoils of war," legitimizing rape as a war tactic (Leatherman, 2011). Social stigma and institutional neglect also reinforce the victim's position as the guilty party (Liebling & Kiziri-Mayengo, 2002). Finally, the manipulation of religious teachings is often used to justify patriarchal control over women's bodies, making sexual violence appear morally legitimate (Ganira, Savala, & Maseno, 2025; Wani & Wani, 2023).

There are three closely interrelated loci of impact of gender-based violence. Direct physical impacts are visible on the body, such as injuries, HIV infection, or forced sterilization experienced by victims. Psycho-symbolically, this violence destroys identity and leaves long-term trauma due to social stigma, affecting both the victim and the child born as a result. Furthermore, systematic sexual violence operates at the socio-normative level, destroying social cohesion and family structures, and undermining the community's self-esteem (Josse, 2010).

The Ecological Dimension

Within the framework of "evil by commission," the ecological dimension encompasses deliberate actions by state or non-state actors that result in severe and prolonged damage to the natural environment—including land, water, air, flora, fauna, and ecosystems—as a direct consequence of military operations, industrial policies, or conflict strategies (Westing, 1980). The focus of this dimension is the environment as an entity of intrinsic value, not merely a conduit for harm to humans. Although it often overlaps with the epidemiological dimension—for example, soil contamination by depleted uranium (DU) that causes cancer—the ecological dimension emphasizes the damage to the ecosystem itself as a criminal act, regardless of whether the impact on humans is documented or not. The uniqueness of the ecological dimension lies in the transboundary and transgenerational nature of its impacts, pollution that crosses national borders, and damage bequeathed to future generations (Panigaj & Berníková, 2023).

The category of material instruments within the ecological dimension encompasses various physical means of warfare proven to cause permanent environmental damage. Depleted uranium munitions used in war leave behind radioactive dust that poses a long-term threat to soil, water, and human health (kidney damage and cancer). Other destructive actions include the burning of oil wells, which contaminate the atmosphere and soil, and the use of defoliants such as Agent Orange, whose effects damage agriculture and forests for decades. Furthermore, sabotage of water infrastructure such as dams destroys unique habitats, and white phosphorus residues contaminate residential soil (Lawrence, Stemberger, Zolderdo, Struthers, & Cooke, 2015).

Environmental damage in armed conflicts is exacerbated by non-material instruments that normalize these impacts. The "shock and awe" doctrine legitimizes

spectacular destruction, supported by military planning policies that disregard ecological mitigation. Accountability for restoration is hindered by the denial of depleted uranium's impacts, the withholding of contamination data under the guise of national security, and the "precision warfare" narrative that shifts blame for damage onto the enemy (Wirtu & Abdela, 2025).

Ecological impacts are dominated by the physical destruction of the environment, such as soil, water, and air contamination, as well as the annihilation of ecosystems, resulting from war waste (such as depleted uranium and burning oil fields). In addition, there are two crucial secondary impacts. First, psycho-symbolic impacts that damage the emotional bond between humans and their ancestral lands, leading to a loss of identity. Second, socio-normative impacts, namely violations of international humanitarian law (regarding environmental damage) erode trust in the legal system itself (Panigaj & Berníková, 2023).

The Psychological Dimension

The psychological dimension within the framework of "evil by commission" refers to deliberate efforts by state and non-state actors to undermine an individual's emotional stability, cognitive capacity, and identity integrity through traumatic violence or psychological manipulation. Unlike the gender dimension, which treats gender constructions as mediators, the psychological dimension is more generic, focusing on the direct disruption of psychological functions. Its primary characteristics include invisible, permanent effects that extend beyond the healing time of physical wounds, trigger transgenerational trauma, and impair the victim's long-term social capacity (Staub, 1992; Bloom, 2002).

Physical forms used to deprive individuals of basic needs or to commit violence serve as material instruments with direct psychological consequences. These methods include physical torture such as sleep deprivation and exposure to extreme temperatures, designed to break the will, and are widely documented in secret prisons (the events at Abu Ghraib). Furthermore, techniques such as prolonged isolation, the demolition of homes in front of their owners, and forcing victims to witness mass executions aim to instill deep-seated fear and permanently damage the victim's mental state (Pérez-Sales, 2016).

Non-physical instruments operate by manipulating the victim's psyche through the manipulation of perception and a sense of security without physical violence. This includes state gaslighting (denial of the victim's reality), dehumanization through propaganda (labeling opponents as "pests"), and symbolic terror (the use of symbols of fear) (Sinha, 2020). Additionally, psychological torture is carried out through the creation of uncertainty regarding one's fate and the coercion of false oaths or confessions that destroy dignity and create prolonged internal conflict within the victim (Alvesson & Einola, 2022).

The psychological impacts are divided into two main focuses. First, the dominant psycho-symbolic locus, encompassing profound mental damage such as trauma, depression, PTSD, and even suicide. These invisible impacts are often permanent and clinically diagnosable. Second, the mediating physical locus, namely experiences of physical violence (torture, mass executions) or physical deprivation (isolation, starvation) that cause psychological damage or trigger psychological trauma. While the social-normative locus is secondary but cannot be ignored—namely, mass trauma—it causes communities to withdraw from public participation, lose trust in institutions, and perpetuate intergenerational cycles of violence, ultimately altering the existing social order (Kelman, 1997).

The Religious Dimension

The religious dimension of "evil by commission" involves deliberate actions by state or non-state actors to undermine, manipulate, or misuse religious symbols and practices for political or military gain, including justifying violence. Unlike general discourse, this dimension specifically targets the foundations of a group's beliefs and identity. Its uniqueness lies in the long-term psychological and spiritual impacts, such as the desecration of sacred sites or fatwas of violence that not only cause physical destruction but also shatter meaning and intergenerational social cohesion (Brubaker, 2015).

Physical religious sites are often targeted to destroy religious life. The systematic destruction of places of worship (mosques, churches, synagogues, temples, monasteries) aims to eliminate spaces for community practice. This is exacerbated by the destruction of artifacts, manuscripts, holy texts, and even pilgrimage sites to sever the chain of knowledge and erase the group's historical evidence. Material obstruction is also carried out through subtle instruments such as discriminatory taxes on minorities or cuts to

funds for the maintenance of places of worship. Furthermore, the repurposing of religious sites into command posts, ammunition depots, or military firing ranges tangibly transforms the sanctity of these places into profane, violence-filled spaces.

Non-material instruments within religion operate by manipulating doctrines and symbols to legitimize violence or undermine group identity. For example, fatwas of war transform violence into a sacred duty by labeling it "jihad." Additionally, the practice of takfir (accusing other groups of apostasy) is used to strip them of moral protection. Another tool is exploiting guilt (sin) to mobilize support for violence as a form of "atonement," as well as the narrative of a "modern crusade" that frames current conflicts as continuations of past wars to deepen polarization. Finally, the public desecration of sacred symbols is often carried out to provoke anger and trigger sectarian conflict (Lindgren & Sonnenschein, 2021; Carpenter, 2014).

The impact of the religious dimension is divided into three distinct areas, with the psycho-symbolic aspect being the strongest as it attacks meaning, identity, and the human relationship with the transcendent. The desecration of sacred sites (such as the siege of the mosque in Najaf) is not merely the destruction of property, but an attack on existential security and the relationship with prominent religious figures. Additionally, there are physical impacts in the form of violence or death, as well as social-normative impacts that undermine coexistence and erode the legitimacy of religious authority when extremist fatwas cannot be contained.

The Epidemiological Dimension

In the context of "evil by commission," the epidemiological dimension encompasses deliberate actions by state or non-state actors that exacerbate the spread of disease, damage medical facilities, or manipulate data for political or military gain, thereby violating the WHO's principles of global health security. This dimension focuses on the direct biological impact on human populations, such as mortality rates and the spread of disease. Its primary characteristic is delayed onset, so the effects are often unrecognized compared to those of direct physical conflict (Price-Smith, 2009; Heymann, 2003).

The material instruments of this dimension include physical elements that directly harm population health. This encompasses the use of toxic and radioactive weapons (e.g., depleted uranium in the Iraq conflict) that trigger long-term health crises. Other significant factors include the targeting of health infrastructure (e.g., in Gaza, 2023),

restrictions on access to medical supplies that cripple drug availability (the case of Iran), and the disruption of vaccine cold-chain systems due to prolonged conflict (occurring in Syria and Yemen) (Rodenhauser, 2014; Fidler & Gostin, 2008).

Meanwhile, non-material instruments, such as policies and discourse, are used to conceal or normalize public health harms. These include data suppression (such as the case of Dr. Baverstock at the WHO regarding depleted uranium), manipulation of study methodologies (such as the 2013 Iraqi birth defects report with flawed procedures), and the repetition of the "insufficient evidence" narrative by authorities (such as the UK Ministry of Defense) despite independent findings. Additionally, there is the delayed release of critical reports, the normalization of illness as a consequence of war, and the avoidance of responsibility for health impacts (Rodenhauser, 2014).

The epidemiological dimension has three interrelated loci of impact. The physical locus is dominant, referring to direct impacts on the human body as a biological entity: cells, organs, bodily systems, and overall physical health. In post-invasion Iraq in 2003, for example, there was an increase in cancer, birth defects "never described in any medical textbook," infertility, recurrent miscarriages, stillbirths, and severe congenital abnormalities (Al-Sabbak, et al., 2012). The psycho-symbolic locus encompasses impacts on public perceptions of their own bodily safety, trust in the healthcare system, and collective trauma resulting from prolonged health crises. The social-normative locus, though secondary, remains significant: when the WHO delayed the release of a report on birth defects in Iraq without adequate explanation, the organization's credibility as an independent and neutral global health guardian was eroded. (Wheelis & Lajos Rózsa, 2006).

Conclusion

Evil in international relations is not a natural phenomenon, but rather "evil by commission"—that is, deliberate and premeditated actions by agents (states, corporations, non-state actors) that are often shielded by extensive bureaucratic structures. A framework that distinguishes between material and non-material instruments, as well as physical, socio-normative, and psycho-symbolic loci, along with seven impact areas, aims to systematically map this evil. This framework is expected to assist other researchers in continuing the crucial effort to position evil in international relations as an object of scientific analysis, rather than merely a moral anomaly.

The proposed framework carries several implications for the study of International Relations. First, the concept of evil need not be confined solely to the realm of moral philosophy or political rhetoric. Through the identified material and non-material instruments, as well as verifiable impact locations, evil can be empirically studied without abandoning its normative content. Second, the question of whether "evil by omission" involves different instruments, is harder to prove, or is easier to conceal, becomes a topic for further research. Distinguishing between active acts (commission) and inaction (omission)—or examining them together—will open opportunities for comparative studies on how evil manifests. Third, this three-axis framework (means, location, area) can be applied to analyze crimes committed by states, transnational corporations, international organizations, and non-state groups. This presents a broad research agenda.

Sincerely,

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