

# Chilcot Tells Us What We Already Knew – How Do We Implement It?

*A version of this article by Gabrielle Rifkind was originally published by **openDemocracy** on 06 July 2016.*

Did we really need 2.6 million words and 7 years of investigations to be told we should be making better decisions when we go to war? Oxford Research Group was **clear** – as is now decidedly stated in the Chilcot report – that invasion would intensify the risks of *internal strife and Al-Qaeda activity in Iraq*. But there was no room for critics of the war as a small sofa cabal of advisors to Tony Blair were already convinced of the its efficacy.

The Chilcot report now clearly states that all peaceful options were not exhausted prior to the invasion, and it is time to learn lessons from the myriad mistakes that were made. The mechanisms and reasoning behind decisions to go to war in Iraq have been exposed, by a series of *ex post facto* inquiries including now Chilcot's Iraq Inquiry as well as published memoirs of political

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and military figures. They have all highlighted that the way decisions were made were inadequate at best, and, at worst, dangerous for UK and global security and certainly for the people of Iraq.

Over the last decade the UK has been involved in three major military engagements, now characterized as ‘strategic failures’. These wars have also shown the current system of presenting the information to those at the heart of decision-making not to fully consider the consequences, and looking like a rubber-stamping exercise. There was little to no engagement with relevant experts who understood the history, culture and the mindset as to how the Iraqi people would react to our invasion of their country.

Chilcot is clear that *the judgments about the severity of the threat... were presented with a certainty that was not justified. Despite explicit warnings, the consequences of the invasion were underestimated.* Decisions to go to war are analysed through our own political lens and objectives, more often coloured by how we wish to see the world and not how it is. For this reason, we have to understand the mind of the people, how they will react, their history and experience, and not make our assessments based on how we hope people will behave. What was needed as an essential part of the decision-making process, was a deep analysis and understanding of the region, its culture and how the people were thinking. Without this we are likely to do more harm than good.

As proved in Iraq, war has devastating consequences. Those in positions of influence therefore need to thoroughly understand what it will mean to the people whose homeland they are invading. Prior to the Iraq war, deluded and myopic narratives about “liberation” were peddled amongst politicians. They convinced themselves that the Iraqi people would see them as liberators. They failed to remember the impact of sanctions that had a devastating impact on

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health, education and the economy. They also forgot that after the 1991 Gulf War the southern Shi'a Arabs had been encouraged by George Bush to rise up against Saddam Hussein – yet he failed to intervene to support them when Ba'athist forces struck back. We might need to ask why the people would trust us after this experience?

Blair, Bush and their advisors convinced themselves that American troops and their partners would be welcomed by the Iraqi people but the legacy of Saddam Hussein's tyranny was not factored in. Exacerbated by years of western sanctions, it was inevitable that, even after the fall of the authoritarian dictator, there would be huge desire for retaliation and the avenging of wrongs that had been suppressed. Tyranny was soon to give way to anarchy.

War decisions sometimes have to be taken swiftly, an obvious case being Libya when Gaddafi threatened an assault on Benghazi. In the cases of both Iraq and Afghanistan, however, the government did not need to take hurried action. There was time for wide-ranging discussion and rigorous consideration. Non-military options were never seriously explored with a proper analysis of the after effects of long-term intervention. As Chilcot identified in his statement, the *UK chose to join the invasion of Iraq before the peaceful options for disarmament had been exhausted*. Chilcot is now clear there was not proper planning and preparation. The consequence is huge insecurity and a country where many would now prefer the harsh authoritarian government of the Hussein years to the chaos of today.

The postwar reconstruction plan precipitated Iraq's decline into chaos and yet again demonstrated how out of touch the US decision-making process was with the real experience of the Iraqi people. Most Iraqis had not consented to this reconstruction experiment, nor to being occupied by foreign forces. The plan

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that was implemented was a de-Ba'athification process, in which thousands of professional people would lose their jobs at a stroke, including doctors and schoolteachers.

In practice, the “reconstruction” became more like a witch hunt. It fragmented the very core of the country's infrastructure, with the disbanding of the security forces and the sacking of its civil servants. This reckless act of dismissing all those who had been employed by the previous regime planted the seeds of the insurgency, and many of those who had served in Saddam Hussein's army now found themselves unemployed, and took their weapons with them. Many of those who were in positions of leadership in the Iraqi military later transferred their skills to the leadership of Islamic State.

The ensuing violence and fragmentation of Iraqi society into sectarian conflict demonstrated the lack of proper, disciplined, strategic thinking about the consequences of the intervention and a failure, according to Chilcot, to appreciate *the magnitude of the task*. Those involved in the planning process failed to imagine what conditions needed to look like to make the people feel safe, apart from the need to address issues of Iraqi security immediately. *The risks of internal strife...regional instability and al Qaeda activity in Iraq were each explicitly identified before the invasion* and yet were ignored in the UK 's Prime Minister's messianic attempt to curry favour with the US President.

Decisions to go to war don't just need to analyze whether we can win. That is the easy part: in tactical terms, the superiority of the western military machine makes this an absolute. Military superiority is the easy first step, but creating and sustaining the peace is the real work. We did not exhaust all peaceful options first, and there is little evidence that we have made this commitment subsequently.

The fog of war and the fog of peace are often extremely hazy, erratic and unpredictable. With one million people displaced in Iraq and at least 150,000 killed, the UK government needs to carry some of the burden of shame. Unless we learn the lessons of our own litany of mistakes for future interventions, peacemaking will become even harder to achieve. If we do not fully understand the implications of our interventions, we can win the war and lose the peace.

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### ***About the Author***

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