

Chilcot: All Peaceful Options Were Not Exhausted

*This article by Gabrielle Rifkind and Scilla Elworthy was originally published by **openDemocracy** on 15 July 2016.*

In October 2002, the Oxford Research Group were approached by a senior Middle Eastern Prince with strong working ties to Saddam Hussein. The Prince wanted to become an interlocutor to talk to Saddam Hussein as part of attempts to avert war. He proposed to explore whether the Iraqi ruler could be coaxed into a quiet passage out of his country, somewhat in the spirit of Napoleon to Elba.

From previous experience he believed that he might have influence over that unpredictable and ruthless character, not least because of his Hashemite roots to the Kingdom of Iraq, founded in 1921 under [British administration](#). He wanted to engage quietly behind the scenes, out of the glare of any publicity, but it was important for him that he had the authority and backing of the British government. This would be both clandestine and deniable, but it would give him an increased legitimacy in his negotiations.

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At the same time, Oxford Research Group was deeply troubled by the building momentum for the invasion of Iraq. Colleagues from the region understood the potential to unleash forces of instability and chaos that would destabilize the balance of power between Iran and Saudi Arabia, as well as creating the chaotic conditions in which Al-Qaida could flourish.

Of course there was no certainty that the Prince's initiative would have been successful, but perhaps what was most significant was the total lack of interest on the part of the British government to take such proposals seriously. They were dismissive and saw no traction in exploring it. It became clear that minds had been made up. A particular path was being pursued and alternative routes for engaging with Saddam Hussein were dismissed as naïve.

Not only was the UK government deaf to advice from those who were from the region and therefore understood the politics, the culture, and the history in more depth, there was also a sense of hunkering down to prepare for the military option. In discussion it became clear that the UK government was holding to a tunnel-vision.

The Chilcot Report could not be more clear that “peaceful options were not exhausted”. Another potential opportunity was presented in December 2002, when a representative of the head of Iraqi Intelligence contacted a former head of CIA counterintelligence. The Iraqi official stated that Saddam knew there was a campaign to link him to the horrific events of 9/11, insisting that he had stockpiled weapons of mass destruction. This key informant added that the Iraqis were able to show these concerns were unfounded. This conversation was reported to senior officials in the State Department, but there was no real interest. Once again minds were closed, because the Bush administration had already decided on regime change and anything less was unacceptable.

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In December 2002, Scilla Elworthy was contacted by the former first lady of Greece, Margarita Papandreou, to help lead a delegation of female leaders of the Middle East to push initiatives to avoid war in Iraq. After a long struggle to get visas and an equal struggle to actually get to Baghdad, the delegation finally arrived on January 3, 2003. To enter the hotel the group had to walk over a mosaic in the entrance floor that depicted the face of George Bush – a piece of Iraqi irony not lost on the many journalists staying there.

Having teamed up with senior UN officials whom were known and trusted, they met with Iraqi cabinet ministers and officials including Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz, Foreign Minister Nagi Sabri, and Oil Minister Amer Mohammed Rashid, as well as with doctors, teachers, and scientists. They had plenty of opportunity to meet ordinary Iraqis and visit sites recently inspected for weapons of mass destruction.

After seven days, Scilla wrote her [first daily blog](#), and the group had collected enough information to write a two-page proposal to Tony Blair, outlining in ten points how war could be avoided. It was placed in Blair's hands a few days later. It was reported that he read it quickly and said, "It's too late." For Blair, it was. Two months later we discovered that irreversible machinery for the US/UK invasion had been set in motion the previous October and that Blair had given Bush his unconditional support a year previously.

All these examples highlight how for a small cabal of decision-makers, once decided to go to war, any alternatives were merely a distraction. Hans Blix confirms this. He personally made a telephone call to Blair on February 20, 2003. He told Blair, after many hundreds of inspections, that they had yielded no evidence of a WMD programme. He even said 'it would prove absurd if

200,000 troops were to invade Iraq and find very little'. Yet another example that once minds are made up the road to war is inevitable.

Tony Blair told the Chilcot enquiry that Saddam Hussein was “a man to whom a last chance to do right is just a further opportunity to do wrong. He is blind to reason.” This may have been an accurate assessment, but like all personalities, however ruthless and cruel their behavior is and has been, there is always a desire for survival. The failure of military intervention and its catastrophic consequences demand that we exhaust all peaceful options prior to military engagement. This was not done.

Image via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

About the Authors

Gabrielle Rifkind directs the Oxford Process of Oxford Research Group and the co-author with Gianni Picco of ***The Fog of Peace***. She is a group analyst and specialist in conflict resolution.

Dr Scilla Elworthy founded the Oxford Research Group in 1982. She has been three times nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize and awarded the Niwano Peace Prize in 2003. She founded Peace Direct in 2002 to fund, promote and learn from local peace-builders in conflict areas. Her latest book is *Pioneering the Possible: Awakened leadership for a world that works* (North Atlantic Books, 2014). Her TED talk on non-violence has been viewed by over 1,000,000 people.

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