



422

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THERE ARE FEW HEROES IN THE STORY OF IRAQ

Francis Ghilès, Associate Senior Researcher, CIDOB

“Mission Accomplished” was the battleship banner boast that summed up President George Bush’s view and that of his close ally, Prime Minister Tony Blair after they had rid the world of what they rightly saw as a viciously brutal regime. By engaging in a war of choice in Iraq, unleashed before the peaceful options for disarmament had been exhausted, Tony Blair sowed a mistrust in government which, when added to the financial crisis of 2008 has fuelled the Brexit vote.

First we must consider the victims of Tony Blair’s decision: the estimate of lives lost in Iraq since 2003 vary from 250,000 to 600,000, the number of injured is several times that, the number of displaced from their homes is between 3.5 and 5 million, between one in ten and one in six of the population. The predicament of Iraq remains misery without end, a vast flow of refugees, a possible splintering of the country and the rise of the Islamic State. The invasion of Iraq opened a Pandora’s box which unleashed any number of tribal, religious and national conflicts which were lying dormant but are now, wave after bloody wave, washing over the Middle East with consequences regionally and worldwide which are still hard to fathom.

The Iraq Enquiry chaired by Sir John Chilcot is not, as many had feared, a white-wash, quite the reverse. It is a forensic, understated and very damning narrative of how a nation rushed into war and, in the process, demeaned the conduct of politics in Britain, severely damaged the trust many ordinary people had in their government and trashed the reputation of a talented politician. As he defended himself against Sir John’s conclusions Tony Blair looked like a broken man.

Top secret reports from the joint intelligence committee, some of which are released for the first time, make clear security services concern about the increasing power in Iraq of jihadi groups, some of which were linked directly to al-Qaida. As early as 2006 one report noted “the label of ‘jihadist’ is becoming increasingly difficult to define: in many cases distinctions between nationalists and jihadists are blurred. They increasingly share common cause being drawn together in the face of Shia sectarian violence”. While MI5 was lucid, MI6 was less so. The head of the former from 2002 to 2007, Eliza Manningham-Buller told the inquiry: “By 2003/4 we were receiving an increasing number of leads to terrorist activity from within the UK...our involvement in Iraq radicalised, for want of a better word...a few

among a generation...(who) saw our involvement in Iraq, on top of our involvement in Afghanistan, as being an attack on Islam." In other words, contrary to what Tony Blair has always argued, the effect of the invasion of Iraq has increased the terrorist threat to the UK.

The French warned but to no avail. President Jacques Chirac was vehemently opposed to the invasion whose outcome he viewed as highly unpredictable and likely to inflame tensions between Shia and Sunni let alone Kurds. Academics warned that were Shias to dominate a recast Iraq, that would offer greater leverage to Iran. Tony Blair paid no heed to such advice nor did his counterpart in Washington, one of whose advisers dismissed a prominent academic specialist of the region with these unforgettable words: "You understand history, we make it." As recent events show, every time we think we have progressed in our fight against Isis, the cornered beasts strikes again. Its military defeat in Syria or Iraq seems more than likely to lead to an even greater wave of terrorism across the Arab world.

But Tony Blair will have none of this. His behaviour was dictated by an eagerness to stay close to the US president, aided and abetted by the strong pull of the so-called "special relationship" between the US and UK which it felt across Whitehall and Westminster; a kind of messianic zeal which derived from having helped to drive Slobodan Milosevic out of Kosovo and rescued the legitimate government of Sierra Leone. This encouraged a new doctrine of western interventionism. In so doing however this progressive internationalist of old undermined the authority of the United Nations rather than upholding it after pursuing a "diplomatic solution" which was really diplomacy aimed at licensing war. That great winner of elections closed his ears to great swathes of the UK, paid no heed to the difference between militant Islamism and secular Ba'athism. He hitched himself to Washington with no get-out clause.

Another connection which has been made by Professor Julian Lindley-French on his blog is that the "failure in Iraq may also have marked the beginning of the end of Britain's membership of the EU". Tony Blair had until then championed Britain's future in the EU and encouraged Central and Eastern European countries to join it. Blair's failure in Iraq thus led, according to this line of reasoning to a huge loss of leadership in Europe – the UK ceded leadership to Germany. The split between Britain on one side, France and Germany on another "has never really healed and the slide towards Brexit began."

There are very few heroes in this story, outside millions of ordinary UK citizens. One exception was Tony Blair's foreign secretary, Robin Cook who resigned after concluding that the evidence he had seen did not justify war. His resignation speech in March 2003 foreshadowed many of the conclusions reached by Sir John Chilcot. The Liberal Democratic Party was unanimous in its condemnation of the war as were a few senior Tories. The Labour Party to its eternal shame backed the prime minister and Jeremy Corbyn, its present leader who adamantly opposed the war is one of the consequences of that choice. Whether future governments heed the report's lessons will make little difference as the defeats in Iraq and Afghanistan, the drastic cut back in military spending and now Brexit suggests Britain's role on the world stage is drawing to a close.

That Tony Blair's reputation has been trashed by the report is of little concern to most people. But that he should have helped shatter the trust between those who govern and those who are governed is. That trust was further damaged by the banking crisis and the austerity it spawned after 2008. In many ways Brexit is the latest chapter in this story of the steady erosion of parliamentary democracy but unlikely to be the last.