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PUBLIC ATTITUDES

TO MILITARY INTERVENTIONISM

The British Foreign Policy Group

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Public Attitudes to UK Military Interventionism

A British Foreign Policy Group evidence review

Contents

Director's Note

There have been many turning points in British foreign policy, but in terms of its interaction with democratic governance, the long-term influence of the War in Iraq cannot be over-stated. At a time when the British people are increasingly conscious of their democratic empowerment, it is critically important for policy-makers to understand the evolution of public opinion, and the nuances it contains. Governance in the 21st Century, even in the long-detached area of foreign affairs – necessitates a more sophisticated awareness of areas of potential conflict and consensus, to bring citizens on board with the nation's global interests.

The evidence gathered in this review provides a meaningful snapshot of the evolving public opinion landscape around military interventionism, and the influence that political events, media coverage, and rising social and political polarisation have played in its formation.

Our findings suggest that, in the absence of a perceived direct threat from terrorism on British soil, the UK Government will find it challenging to convince citizens of the validity of British international military activities – particularly the need for 'boots on the ground'. While the welfare of our armed forces is considered paramount, Britons are also increasingly attuned to the impact of global conflicts on the long-term peace and security of developing nations, and uncomfortable about the role that we may play in exacerbating these. Until the Government can convince the public of our capacity to not just 'win the war' but also 'keep the peace', it is likely there will be pressure to maintain a lighter touch military footprint in international disputes.

Sophia Gaston
Director of the British Foreign Policy Group.

Executive Summary

Since the turn of the century, public attitudes towards UK military intervention have varied dramatically, as illustrated in the graph below which tracks the variation of public attitudes towards UK military intervention since 2001. As we can see, the decision of former Prime Minister Tony Blair to go to war in Iraq in 2003, whilst contested, was relatively popular amongst the British public at the time[1]. However, the impact of this war, and subsequent engagements in Libya and Syria, have fundamentally altered the landscape of public opinion towards intervention. At a time when Britain's place in the world is in flux, we examine the under-researched question of what role the public would support the UK taking in foreign conflicts.

This report charts the development of public opinion towards UK military intervention since the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Military intervention in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Iraq once more have shifted the discourse of military intervention, both amongst the public and in parliament.
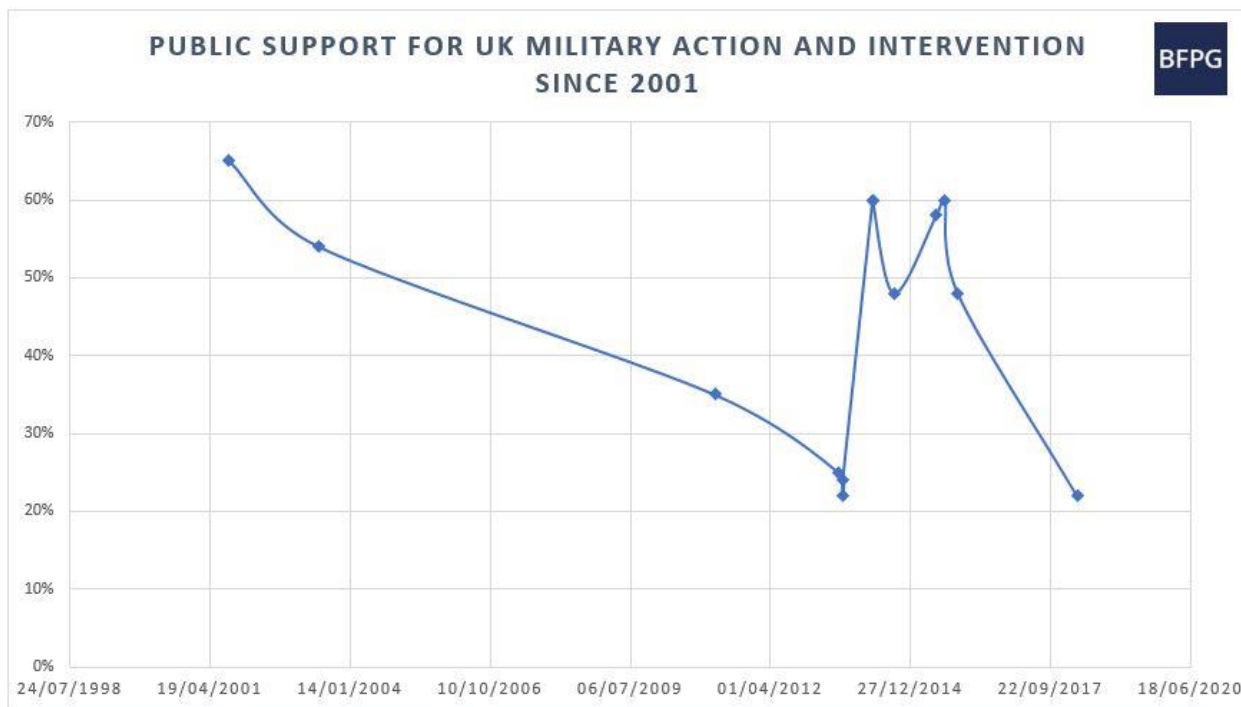
PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR UK MILITARY ACTION AND INTERVENTION SINCE 2001

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Tracker of public support towards UK military intervention since 2001. Graph includes attitudes towards only those interventions that took place or were proposed by government (for example in Syria in 2013). Intervention in this instance therefore covers a breadth of actions from 'boots on the ground' operations to air strikes.
Source: Ipsos MORI, YouGov, ComRes, Opinium/Observer

Key findings:

- The landscape of public opinion towards UK military intervention has changed dramatically since 2003. Tony Blair governed a nation that was largely supportive of the UK's military operations abroad in both Afghanistan and Iraq. These conflicts, and subsequent interventions in Libya, Syria, and Iraq once more have significantly dampened the public will to intervene.

- At the time of the Iraq War, support for the invasion amongst the general public was generally high – an average of YouGov polls from March to December 2003 found that 54% thought the decision to go to war was justified[2]. Even then, it was clear that some constituencies held reservations about this level of intervention. 74% were found to be in favour of intervention if a second UN resolution were to be passed or if weapons inspectors found proof that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

- Once boots hit the ground in Iraq, support levels began to dip. Almost a decade after the conflict began, in 2012, 58% of the public said that it was wrong to go to war in Iraq. It is likely that concern over the UK's intentions in Iraq were at play here, as 47% selected 'ensuring Western oil supplies' as the major reason for UK deployment of armed forces[3], compared to the 32% that selected 'preventing the acquisition of WMD'. The reaction against the Iraq War was so strong that in 2013 22% of the public said that Blair should be tried as a war criminal over the conflict[4].

- The shadow of the Iraq War likely informed public attitudes to British involvement in Libya in 2011, which only 35% of the public supported[5]. 65% said that they believed UK military involvement would last for 'some time'. The UK withdrew its troops from Iraq in 2011, eight years after the invasion.

- Waning public support for British armed intervention manifested itself in Parliament's decision to veto UK intervention in Syria in 2013. Only 9% of the public supported sending British troops to Syria at the time[6]. 25% supported missile strikes (50% opposed). Following Parliament's rejection of airstrikes, 68% of the public agreed that MPs had made the right decision. The public were concerned about becoming involved in another long conflict, as 51% of those who opposed UK military action indicated that a limited missile attack 'would probably have ended up with Britain being dragged into further military action and British troops having to go into Syria'[7].

- The insurgency of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014/15 had a reviving effect on public support for UK military intervention. Indeed, in 2014 support for intervention in Iraq surged, with 60% supporting airstrikes against ISIS, and 30% supporting sending troops[8]. Support for sending troops to fight IS in Syria was lower, at 20%. This was likely due to public fears of the UK becoming involved in the Syrian civil war. 39% of the public expressed opposition to widening UK operations in Iraq into Syria if it extended to taking sides in the Syrian civil war[9].

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- The boost to public support for military intervention that ISIS provided was short-lived, as when the government conducted airstrikes in Syria in 2018, public support was limited. Only 22% of Britons said they would support a cruise missile attack against the Syrian military, and 43% would oppose[10].
- In November 2018, 52% of adults said they opposed UK military intervention overseas[11], reflecting the overall reduction in support for military intervention since the invasion of Iraq.

Our findings demonstrate a downward shift in public support for UK military intervention abroad. This shift in public opinion, together with the increasing strength of Parliament as a veto player in military intervention, may well play a role in shaping future British defence policy.

In the wake of the EU referendum, the public are becoming more vocal and more divided on a range of issues, and these divides are shaping policy platforms in turn. As public opinion plays a more central role in government policymaking, we may see these relatively negative opinions towards military intervention affecting defence decisions. Either way, it is clear that our government presides over an ever more contested landscape than the one Prime Minister Blair faced in 2003.

1. Introduction

Public attitudes towards UK military intervention have varied dramatically throughout the 21st Century. Former Prime Minister Tony Blair's decision to join US President Bush's invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 was relatively popular amongst the British public[12]. So, too, was Blair's decision two years later to join the US-led invasion of Iraq. The anti-Iraq War lobby, although only a subset of the population, was powerful and well-organised. Opposition built as the war dragged on, British troops were lost, and Blair's reasons for invasion crumbled before him. Eight years of involvement in Iraq, for increasingly weak justifications, impregnated a sense of 'war fatigue' in the public psyche. This fatigue manifested itself in Parliament, and Parliament's decision to veto Prime Minister David Cameron's proposal for airstrikes on Syria in 2013 was the result.

Since then, public support for UK military intervention has been on the upswing. The insurgency of the violent and deadly 'Islamic State in Iraq and Syria' from 2014, posed an existential threat to the Western world order. Parliament therefore chose to approve Cameron's push for intervention in Iraq in 2014 to fight the so-called Islamic State, and subsequently approved Cameron's decision to extend the mission into Syria. Public opinion matched these decisions.

However, with Islamic State all but defeated in Iraq and Syria, conflict still wages on in the Middle East, insurgencies in the Sahel grow ever more deadly, violent protests from Hong Kong to Chile risk sparking conflict, and the threats from hostile states continue to grow.

In this context of an ever more uncertain world order, the British Armed Forces are recovering from a decade of austerity. Despite recent increases to their budget, experts have warned that more funds will be needed if the UK is to keep up with the pace of technological change and sophisticated threats.

Britain, therefore, is at a cross roads in terms of its military might. In the wake of the decline of ISIS, governments have begun to exert Britain's military strength on the world stage once more – in Syria in 2018, and most recently in sending troops (in non-combative roles) to Mali in 2019. How the public feels towards such interventions is contested, and will form the basis of this report. Should the UK limit its military operations to short excursions only where the livelihoods of British citizens are at stake, or should it take a leading role in Western coalitions to support human rights and punish humanitarian abuses across the world? Perhaps it will fall somewhere in between.

However Britain might choose to act in the coming decade, it is vital that actions mirror public opinion, else it risk the unrest and disenfranchisement on a scale of the 'Stop the War' rally of February 2003.

This report will examine British intervention since 2003, with the aim of fully understanding where public opinion on UK intervention is today, and where it might go in the decade to come.

Chapter 2 will look at the case study of the Iraq War, to examine the shifts in both public and Parliamentary opinion towards intervention that the conflict has contributed to. The Iraq War represented a high point of UK military alignment with the US, and a far-reaching sense of moral interventionism on the world stage. The case study is also useful in that it marks the first time that Parliament were given a veto on intervention in over fifty years, and, despite the vocal opposition, a slight public majority in favour of the government decision to go to war.

During the UK's involvement in Iraq, public support for British military involvement abroad melted away. **Chapter 3** will explore this phenomenon in relation to the government's proposed intervention in Syria in 2013, which Parliament vetoed, for the first time since 1782. The case study reveals that Parliament and the public alike felt the circumstances were too close to those prior to the government's intervention in Iraq in 2003, and fatigue on the part of both led to a rejection of the proposed airstrikes.

Since 2013, the landscape of public attitudes towards intervention have been murkier, with deep fluctuations surrounding military involvement against ISIS, and again in Syria in 2018. These fluctuations will be explored in more detail in **Chapter 4**, which examines the changing nature of public opinion, and the factors that have contributed to these changes, from external conflict to domestic shocks such as the Chilcot Report on the Iraq War, to the present day.

Chapter 5 will breakdown the attitudes of different demographics towards military intervention. **Chapter 6** examines where public opinion is currently on UK military intervention, looking at demographic factors and public attitudes towards different aspects of the armed forces.

Finally, **Chapter 7** will review the findings of the report and provide some closing remarks.

2. Iraq Case Study

The Iraq War represents a pivotal moment for the UK's opinion towards armed intervention. The contested reasons for the invasion, followed by a long drawn-out conflict in which the UK suffered 179 military deaths[13], and the release in 2016 of the damning Chilcot Report, published thirteen years after the invasion, have cast a long shadow over any debates and discussions on UK armed intervention into foreign conflicts since 2003.

This case study is necessary to investigate exactly how the Iraq War has affected public opinion and parliamentary proceedings surrounding military intervention in Britain.

Overview

The UK's – and the West's – relationship towards Iraq and its authoritarian leader, Saddam Hussein, had been strained since Iraq's attempted annexation of Kuwait in 1991[14]. US-Iraqi relations strained further following the 9/11 attacks by Al Qaeda on the USA and President George Bush's subsequent declaration of a 'War on Terror'[15]. US-led forces invaded Afghanistan on 7th October 2001[16].

In his State of the Union address on 29th January 2002, Bush identified Iraq, along with Iran and North Korea, as part of an 'axis of evil' that harboured, financed and aided terrorists[17]. Whilst many Western nations suspected Iraq of possessing Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), most preferred using UN avenues to try and force Saddam Hussein to comply with weapons inspections. The US advocated for a total regime change, and was prepared to act unilaterally should the UN not sanction military intervention.

UK Prime Minister Tony Blair attempted to balance conflicting demands of the US's desire for regime change and the need to build international support and legitimacy for the position that Iraq was a threat that needed to be dealt with[18]. He was initially successful in securing US support for UN Resolution 1441 in November 2002 which gave Iraq a final opportunity to comply with its disarmament obligations. Between November 2002 and March 2002, the UN's Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission fails to find WMD despite carrying out 700 inspections in Iraq.

Despite this, it had become clear in early 2003 that unless Saddam Hussein stepped down, the US would pursue unilateral military action. Attempts to secure a further UN Resolution failed, as France and Russia declared that they were ready to veto proposals[19].

After securing the backing of the House of Commons (412 to 149 votes)[20] on 18th March 2003, Operation Iraqi Freedom began on 20th March 2003, led by a coalition of UK and US forces[21]. By May 2003, President Bush had declared 'mission accomplished', as Iraqi civilians and US soldiers pulled down an infamous statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad's Firdos Square. The Iraqi Army was disbanded the same month[22], but initial violent uprisings against the US-led occupation began to coalesce into an organised resistance, which allowed

insurgent and extremist groups to gain ground in the country, including Al Qaeda. Iraqis voted for their first government in 2005, but sectarian violence continued to grip the country, as the complete destruction of the Saddam-era state structures left a gaping power vacuum in the country[23]. Allied combat troops therefore remained in Iraq until the start of withdrawal in 2009.

In May 2003, a BBC report cast doubt on the Government's 2002 dossier of intelligence that said that Iraq had WMD, capable of being activated within 45 minutes[24]. That July, the government weapons expert David Kelly was found dead after being exposed as the source of the BBC story. By July 2004, the 'Butler Review' on military intelligence had found key information which was used to justify the war in Iraq to be unreliable, as MI6 did not check sources well enough, and sometimes relied on third-hand reports.

Regardless, UK forces only withdrew in May 2011[25], after eight years of combat, leaving Iraq destabilised, deeply divided along sectarian lines, and open to insurgencies. There were over 4,700 allied troop deaths, and anywhere between 100,000 and 600,000 Iraqi civilian deaths[26].

Public Opinion

At the public level, the Government's decision to invade Iraq was met with mass opposition, culminating in the biggest public protest the country has ever seen, **the 'Stop the War' rally on 15th February 2003, which attracted up to two million people[27]**.

Despite its size, **less than 5% of respondents** to the British Social Attitudes survey of 2012 **reported taking part in activities to oppose the campaign[28]**. Analysis of the survey found that protesters against the mission were likely to be university educated, politically aligned to the left, highly interested in politics and active members in organisations – such as environmental groups, unions, humanitarian groups and church groups[29].

Public opposition to military intervention prior to 2003 was relatively low, with 65% of Britons in 2001 indicating their support for the UK-US joint military strikes against Afghanistan in response to the terrorist attacks of 11th September[30]. Further, 67% indicated their agreement with the statement that 'the British and American governments have clear objectives for the military attacks on Afghanistan[31]. A further 52% agreed that 'the military attacks on Afghanistan will be successful in the end in achieving these objectives.'[32].

On the UK's invasion of Iraq, polls from the time suggest a variation of levels of support and opposition for war depending on the specific scenarios that were posed. In a comprehensive study, YouGov conducted 21 polls from March to December asking British people whether they thought the decision to go to war was right or wrong, **and on average 54% said it was right[33]**. Still, many polls from the time reflect slightly more respondents opposing the war than supporting it, with a slight peak in the final week before the invasion – the 'rallying round the flag' effect[34].

IPSOS asked respondents whether they would support or oppose British troops joining any American-led military action against Iraq in the event that UN inspectors do not find proof that Iraq is trying to hide weapons of mass destruction, and the UN security council does not vote in favour of military action, and 26% said yes (63% oppose)[35]. **74% were in favour of intervention if a second UN resolution passed or if weapons inspectors find proof that Iraq had WMD**. ICM found a 38% approval rate for an attack to remove Saddam Hussein[36].

Opposition to the war has increased over time as the government's case for invasion to stop the use of WMD broke down. This potentially impacted the public's memory of their attitudes towards the invasion. For example, **58% of respondents to the 2012 BSA survey said that the UK was wrong to go to war in Iraq[37]**. Asked what they thought the major reasons for the UK deployment of armed forces to Iraq were, **47% selected ensuring Western oil supplies, and 32% said preventing the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction**. Further, those that selected 'ensuring Western oil supplies' as the objective of the mission were then significantly more likely to disagree with the campaign (69%), compared to those that selected prevention of WMD (51%), and were 14% less likely to perceive the mission as successful.

Analysts have found that opposition to the UK's military operations in Iraq increases with age – 66% of over-65s compared with 47% of 18-34 year-olds[38]. There is also a higher level of opposition among people with a lower level of education. Women were significantly less likely to either agree or disagree with the success of the mission compared to men[39].

Confounding the suggestion that people's views of armed intervention are linked to political partisanship, agreement that the Iraq War was wrong extends across the political spectrum, with the majority of people opposed to the mission despite their political affiliation[40].

It is likely that two complementary variables have contributed to the public's enduring disapproval of the Iraq War: the government's perceived dishonesty over its motivations for invasion, and the perceived failure of the war and death of UK servicepeople. It is important to note the role that the media has played in formulating popular opposition to the war. Strong has noted that most British newspapers predominantly opposed the invasion of Iraq, **although pro-war publications outsold anti-war publications by 1.88 million to 1.24 million copies[41]**. The Murdoch press gave unwavering and unequivocal support for the invasion[42].

Firstly, **the government's perceived dishonesty over its motivations for invasion.** As noted above, 47% of respondents to a 2012 survey selected ensuring Western oil supplies as a major reason for the deployment of armed forces. This presents a stark comparison with the public's view on the purpose of UK military involvement in Afghanistan, where the majority of respondents selected protecting the UK from the risk of terrorism (53%) and achieving stability (50%), both of which were cited by the government as reasons for involvement at the time. Further, as noted above, those that believed the Government's main objective for the Iraq War was ensuring oil supplies were more likely to disagree with the campaign. This suggests that the perceived reasons for armed intervention are significant for building public approval (or disapproval) for intervention.

Indeed, Gribble et al (2014) suggest it is likely that Afghanistan's relative popularity compared to Iraq is due to a combination of the tone of self-defence after 9/11, UN authorisation, and the broader focus on state building and improving living standards for the local population (for Afghanistan)[43].

A second confounding variable for the public's disapproval of the Iraq War is the **death of UK personnel**. The UK suffered 179 military deaths during Operation TELIC, and the allied troops suffered 4,700 deaths overall. Gribble et al (2014) report that a greater proportion of participants who disagreed with UK involvement in Iraq or Afghanistan overestimated the number of military fatalities. Accurate estimates of military casualties were significantly higher among people who believed the mission in Iraq was to ensure oil supplies (24%) for the West than those who believed the mission was to prevent acquisition of WMD (18%).

Respondents to a NatCen survey showed overwhelming agreement for the statement 'regardless of what I think about the mission to Iraq, I support members of the UK Armed Forces who have recently served there' (94%)[44]. **The majority of those who had either a high or a very high opinion of the Armed Forces agreed with the statement that the UK was wrong to go to war with Iraq (59% and 55% respectively).**

Worries over the safety of troops were reflected in attitudes towards the Armed Forces' withdrawal from Afghanistan, with the public evenly split between supporting the withdrawal of troops 'as soon as possible, without conditions' and 'as soon as government can protect itself AND prevent terrorism' in the 2011 BSA Survey[45]. In a separate poll for YouGov, 72% of respondents supported the government's decision to withdraw troops from Iraq[46].

The Role of Parliament

Tony Blair's decision to consult Parliament on the proposed intervention in Iraq was the first of its kind since the Korean War in 1950, the only time in the 20th century that the House of Commons held a substantive vote over military action[47]. Blair had used adjournment debates to announce Operation Desert Fox (Iraq) in 1998, interventions in Kosovo in 1999, and Sierra Leone in 2000, and the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001.

Foreign Secretary Jack Straw responded in February 2003 to criticisms of a 'rush to war' by saying that they had already given Saddam twelve years (since 1991), and that:

"With each passing year of Iraqi defiance of international opinion, there has been growing awareness of the immense consequences of a failure to match our words with actions."[48]

"If the UN proves unable to act on the spirit and the letter of mandatory Chapter VII resolutions when faced with the most egregious non-compliance it risks joining its predecessor, the League of Nations, as a footnote in history."

Strong (2015) suggests that Blair offered MPs a vote as a way to win legitimacy, as he said he would resign if he lost the vote[49]. Although MPs voted for the government's motion for invasion by 412 to 149 votes, **a rebel amendment opposing the government's stance on Iraq received 217 votes, 139 of which were from Labour backbenchers**. It was the largest backbench rebellion since the 1846 repeal of Corn Laws[50], and Blair suffered two ministerial resignations from his government over the decision, including former Foreign Secretary and Leader of the House Robin Cook, who remarked in a speech in Parliament:

"The reality is that Britain is being asked to embark on a war without agreement in any of the international bodies of which we are a leading partner – not NATO, not the European Union, and now, not the Security Council?

'Only a year ago, we and the United States were part of a coalition against terrorism that was wider and more diverse than I would ever have imagined possible. History will be astonished at the diplomatic miscalculations that led so quickly to the disintegration of that powerful coalition."[51]

Both the governing Labour Party and the Conservative opposition supported the war, however significant numbers of backbench Labour MPs rebelled. The Liberal Democrats opposed the motion due to the lack of UN authorisation. Charles Kennedy, the leader of the Liberal Democrats, gave an impassioned speech at the 'Stop the War' protest:

"Before launching an almighty assault upon Iraq, is it not better to pursue the course of disarmament on the ground in the presence of weapons inspectors?"[52]

Other notable figures, including Ken Clarke, Menzies Campbell, Tony Benn, George Galloway, and celebrities including Chris Martin, Damon Albarn, Ms Dynamite and Bianca Jagger opposed the war. Non-governmental organizations, including the think tank Chatham House, appeared to play a mediating role, but erred on the side of the government. In 2005, Chatham House's Paul Cornish said the motives for intervention in Iraq were 'complex and by no means all unattractive', and that there would be worse consequences following a withdrawal, so perhaps 'history might be kinder in retrospect in its assessment of the episode'[53].

Since 2003, parliamentary opinion has moved dramatically away from support for the Iraq War. In 2009, Prime Minister Gordon Brown commissioned an inquiry into the war, covering the decision to go to war, whether troops were properly prepared, how the conflict was conducted and what planning there was for its aftermath.

The Chilcot Report[54] detailed the findings of the inquiry. Published in 2016, **it found that the decision to invade Iraq was made in unsatisfactory circumstances**. The Report also criticises the Blair government for a lack of post-invasion strategy. After the Bush

administration appointed ambassador Paul Bremer to head a new coalition of provisional authority in Baghdad, the UK had no input into subsequent decisions taken by Bremer, including the dissolving of Saddam's army and security structures, which alienated the Sunni community and fed the subsequent jihadist insurgency[55].

In response to the inquiry, Blair said that:

"Failures in American planning are well documented and accepted…I note nonetheless that the Inquiry fairly and honestly admit that they have not even after this passage of time been able to identify alternative approaches which would have guaranteed greater success."[56]

Parliamentary opinion since the invasion has turned staunchly against the war, with the House in 2016 debating a motion put forward by former SNP leader, Alex Salmond, to hold Tony Blair accountable for misleading parliament during the run up to the 2003 Iraq War[57] (the motion was voted down 439 votes to 70, with Labour issuing a one-line whip to its MPs to vote against). Some, such as James Strong, have gone as far as to attribute Jeremy Corbyn's election as leader of the Labour Party as a consequence of Blair's decision to fight 'a war in Iraq that so many British people considered illegitimate'[58]. Corbyn generally opposes the use of force by Western states, and suggested that he would back the motion to find Blair guilty of contempt of Parliament in 2016, although he was otherwise engaged on the day[59]. Some politicians form the time have continued to support the decision to go to war, including Dame Margaret Beckett.

Speaking to Chatham House in May 2017, Jeremy Corbyn criticised the interventionism of the past, saying:

"Regime change wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria – and Western interventions in Afghanistan, Somalia and Yemen – have failed in their own terms, and made the world a more dangerous place."[60]

Legal and human rights groups spoke out following the Chilcot report's release, with Amnesty International urging the UK to comply with international investigations into alleged unlawful killings and torture carried out by British troops during the war, and Reprieve saying the Inquiry left unanswered questions about the depth of British involvement in torture[61].

Conclusions

The long-drawn out Iraq War has deeply scored both the political consciousness of Parliament but also the public more widely. The tumbling rates of both public and

parliamentary approval towards military intervention can be attributed, at least in part, to the perceived failures of Iraq. Next, we examine the Government's decision not to join coalition airstrikes in Syria in 2013, how this was affected by Iraq, and what public opinion was towards the proposed intervention both at the time and since.

3. Syria Case Study

In August 2013, the House of Commons voted down David Cameron's proposal to launch airstrikes in Syria in response to a suspected chemical weapons attack by the Assad regime. The proximity of the vote to the Iraq War and the similarity of the circumstances has led some commentators to ascribe Cameron's loss to a 'war fatigue' amongst Parliament and the public. In this case study we unpack that analysis, examining opinion both in Parliament and amongst the public, and events during and after the vote, in order to understand public attitudes towards military intervention today.

Overview

The Syrian civil war began as pro-democracy demonstrations broke out in Deraa in southern Syria in March 2011, as part of the 'Arab Spring' protests that gripped much of the Arab world[62], toppling autocratic regimes in Tunisia and Egypt. The Syrian government, led by President Bashar al-Assad, violently suppressed the uprisings, calling them 'foreign-backed terrorism'. The conflict rapidly escalated, as foreign states and groups entered the fray – Russia and Iran on Assad's side, backed by thousands of militants from Lebanon's Hezbollah and Iraq, Afghanistan and Yemen; and the opposition supported by Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and initial aid from the US, France and UK.

Given the UK and the West's role in toppling the regime of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya in 2011 after Gaddafi had similarly brutally suppressed the Arab Spring protests in his country, speculation as to what, if any, role the UK would play in Syria was rife. This speculation came to the fore in 2013 as it emerged that the Assad regime had likely used chemical weapons to attack three suburbs in Damascus on 21st August. Chemical weapons attacks crossed a so-called 'red line' of acceptability in warfare, drawn by US President Obama[63], that would not be tolerated by the West. Chemical weapons attacks are banned by the Chemical Weapons Convention of 1993[64].

In the face of mounting pressure, David Cameron recalled Parliament in late August 2013 to debate launching airstrikes in Syria in response to the chemical weapons attack. The UK, France and Germany each concluded that the Assad regime was responsible for the attack.

Having gained the support of Parliament for the UK's 2011 intervention in Libya as part of an UN-mandated NATO coalition, Cameron was relatively confident he could win the support of MPs.

However, the Libyan case was perceived very differently by MPs to that of Syria. **MPs approved the motion to join the Libyan mission 557 votes to 13.** UN Security Council Resolution 1973 paved the way for international action in Libya. James Strong suggests that support was won for the Libyan intervention due to the case Cameron made for British participation in the UN mandate, his insistence that 'this is not another Iraq', the need to

protect civilians from imminent and demonstrable danger, and the insistence that no British ground troops would be used[65].

For the Syria vote, by contrast, MPs were uncertain about the provenance of the Damascus strike[66], and saw no imperative to act as there was no imminent threat of a further attack. Further, there was no **UN mandate for intervention in Syria** – the Security Council was deadlocked as Russia had vetoed any intervention.

The Government motion was defeated by 285 votes to 272. Both the Conservative and Liberal Democrat leadership supported the Government's motion, as did the majority of the MPs from the ruling parties. Nine Liberal Democrats voted against the motion, and thirty Conservative MPs.

Public Opinion

Limited public support for both airstrikes in Syria in 2013, and the military intervention in Libya in 2011, gives credence to the idea that the 'will to fight' amongst the British public was waning after the Iraq war. Indeed, **only 35% of the public supported the 2011 UK airstrikes in Libya, with 65% saying they believed that military involvement would last for 'some time'**[67]. It is possible that the length and intransigence of the conflict in Iraq had made the public wary of military involvement that appeared to have similar characteristics. Both Libya and Syria can be described as such – as with Iraq, both were led by dictators unpopular in the West for decades, and neither were host to large civil society organisations that could facilitate with transition and state-building should their leaders be deposed.

As such, public support for UK military intervention in Syria was limited. In the days preceding the vote, **one survey showed strong opposition both to missile strikes inside Syria (50% opposed), and to providing military support for the anti-Assad forces (61% opposed)**[68]**. Enforcing a no-fly zone received 42% opposition**.

A YouGov poll in August 2013 revealed that **only 9% supported sending British troops to Syria**, while **74% opposed** the move[69]. This suggests a tendency amongst the public to oppose 'boots on the ground', rather than opposing all out intervention. The same YouGov poll found that **25% supported missile strikes (50% opposed)**[70]. In the four days that followed, during which time No.10 confirmed it was considering a bombing strike, support for missile strikes **dropped from 25% to 22%**. It was later that day (29th August 2013) that MPs voted to reject Cameron's call for possible military action.

A poll by YouGov shortly after Parliament's rejection of Cameron's push for airstrikes revealed that **68% of respondents agreed that MPs had made the right decision to vote against Britain taking part in military action in Syria**[71]**.** Around 60% of those polled in an Opinium/Observer poll said that, given the level of evidence about the use of chemical weapons by the Bashar al-Assad regime, they were against British troops intervening, while 24% said they were in favour[72].

Despite these low levels of public support, Kaarbo and Kenealy (2016) maintain that given the tightness of the vote, and the fact that the vast majority of MPs cast a vote that kept the option of military force on the table, public opinion was not decisive although the public mood may have played an indirect role, for example in influencing Ed Miliband's decision not to back the government motion[73].

Role of Parliament

The Syria vote was the first time a Prime Minister has lost a vote on military action since 1782[74]. Although Tony Blair had given MPs the option to veto Iraq, and Cameron had given Parliament a vote on Libya, in neither instance had Parliament actually voted against the Government's proposal. The loss in itself was thus unusual, as was Cameron acting according to the wishes of Parliament and refusing to join the US-led airstrikes in August 2013.

Then foreign secretary William Hague promised to 'enshrine in law for the future the necessity of consulting Parliament on military action'[75], but this was never fulfilled.

Of further importance, Kaarbo and Kenealy argue, was the decision by Ed Miliband, leader of the opposition, to table an amendment late in the day and instruct Labour MPs to vote against the government, ultimately resulting in Cameron's loss[76]. Miliband has since been praised by some for 'preventing war', although George Eaton, writing for the New Statesman, noted that Labour did not expect to win the vote and it was a 'surprise' when Cameron subsequently ruled out any intervention without attempting a second vote[77].

Vital for the government's loss was the opposition to the motion by the Labour Party, led by Ed Miliband. Kaarbo and Kenealy argue Miliband's decision to table an amendment late in the day and instruct Labour MPs to vote against the government ultimately resulted in Cameron's loss[78]. Miliband himself had partly won his party's leadership due to his opposition to the Iraq War. He warned against a rush to action:

"People are deeply concerned about the chemical weapons attack in Syria, but they want us to learn the lessons of Iraq…they don't want a rush to war. They want things done in the right way, working with the international community."[79]

Nine Liberal Democrats also voted against the motion, and thirty Conservative MPs, despite their Party's official support for the intervention. Indeed, Liberal Democrat leader Lord Ashdown tweeted after the vote that 'in 50 years trying to serve my country I have never felt so depressed [or] ashamed.'

Conservative rebel Crispin Blunt spoke out against the government, saying that he hoped the vote would:

"Relieve ourselves of some of this imperial pretension that a country of our size can seek to be involved in every conceivable conflict that's going on around the world."

Liam Fox, former Defense Secretary, spoke in favour of the airstrikes:

"I believe it shows the people of Syria that we are on their side and I think it shows that the rest of the world is serious in enforcing the law that already exists about the use of chemical weapons."[80]

Cameron's loss can be attributed to a number of factors. James Strong suggests that Cameron failed by letting Syria look like a rerun of the perceived disaster in Iraq[81]. He lacked support from the opposition, there was limited support for further war, and Cameron's MPs were ready to rebel. Shashank Joshi, of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), noted the ramifications that the exploitation or reinterpretation of a red line would have on the Assad regime's – and other repressive regime's – perceptions of the cost of breaking international norms[82].

Ralph et al (2017) also suggest that there was a sense of 'déjà vu' from Iraq which ultimately led to Parliament's rejection of the Government's motion[83]. The Government was perceived as rushing to support the US president, prejudging the evidence of UN weapons inspectors, failing to command consensus at the UN Security Council and relying on questionable intelligence reports and contested legal advice.

This was illustrated in Conservative MP John Redwood's scepticism over the deterrence effect that the airstrikes were purported to have:

'How many soldiers and managers of soldiers and officers would you need to kill in order to guarantee that Assad will not do it again? I fear when you have someone as mad and bad as Assad, the answer might be very high…"[84]

As with Iraq, government motives were unclear. Cameron argued that force would only be used to punish the use of chemical weapons and not to overthrow the regime. Ralph et al hold that the government's case for limited force was not trusted, given the context of broader policy and insistence that Assad must go. In the shadow of criticism that coalition forces in Libya had gone beyond the UN mandate, this concern was exacerbated[85].

Other establishment voices were not ass supportive of the government's intervention as they had been in the case of Iraq. RUSI's Malcolm Chalmers said:

"Calling for a vote while the UN inspectors were still in Damascus was always going to be a very hard sell when the case for action rested heavily on an assessment of what happened on the ground.

"The experiences of Iraq and Afghanistan have left most MPs – and, even more so, a large majority of their voters – deeply sceptical of claims that military action can remain limited once the first shot is fired."[86]

The memory of Iraq was clearly at the forefront of minds. Indeed, Kaarbo and Kenealy suggest that the memory of the Iraq War and general war fatigue was important, but equally so was Cameron's leadership style which exacerbated intraparty tensions[87]. They suggest his recalling of Parliament in a haphazard manner, his attempts to rush through a vote before the UN inspectors completed their work, and his refusal to disclose comprehensively the legal advice received by the Government, all contributed to the Government's failure.

Conclusions

It is clear from the above that the Syria vote looked alarmingly similar to the beginning of the Iraq war to too many key stakeholders. Whether this comparison meant that both Parliament and the public rejected intervention in Syria on grounds of wanting to avoid the same mistakes, or a wider movement away from UK intervention in other country's affairs, is contested.

Jamie Gaskarth (2016), for example, suggests that policymakers ignored underlying trends impacting on foreign policy such as the breakdown of bipartisanship, increasing public scepticism about government use of intelligence and the utility of force[88].

Peter Kellner (2013) also argues that voters rejected Britain's participation in Syria only in those particular circumstances[89]. Writing shortly after Parliament's rejection of Cameron's plan, when 68% of respondents to a YouGov poll agreed that MPs had made the right decision, Kellner suggests that the lack of public support was due to the government's failure to persuade the public that Assad had ordered the use of chemical weapons, and the public fear that British troops would be dragged into another Middle East conflict. Figures from the time support these hypotheses, as only **43% of those polled believed Assad was responsible for the chemical weapons attack in question**, and a further 51% of those who opposed UK military action indicated that a limited missile attack 'would probably have ended up with Britain being dragged into further military action and British troops having to go into Syria'[90].

Kellner's argument raises an important point about public perceptions of conflict in the Middle East compared to those in the rest of the world. Kellner employs responses to a YouGov poll that indicate that despite opposition to the Syrian airstrikes, the public do not

support a wider doctrine of disengagement from the world's problems[91]. In the poll, seven circumstances are posed to respondents in which Britain might consider sending troops into action outside Europe, such as to help a friendly country that has been invaded, to overthrow a dictator who has used WMD, to attack terrorist bases, to stop an unfriendly country acquiring nuclear weapons, to work alongside local troops and police forces at the request of the local government to bring stability, and to take part in UN operations authorised by the Security Council. In every case most respondents said we should definitely, or seriously consider taking part.

The Syria case study thus allows us to distinguish between a wariness amongst the British public towards being involved in 'Iraq-style' conflicts with no real end point, no clearly defined 'good' or 'bad' sides, and a high level of risk to the UK Armed Forces; and a continuation of sentiment amongst the majority of the British public that the UK should intervene in foreign conflicts under certain circumstances.

4. Case study analysis and subsequent interventions

The public backlash against Iraq was fuelled by the publication of the Chilcot Inquiry in 2016. Together with Parliament's defeat of Cameron's proposal for Syrian airstrikes, and widespread public approval of Parliament's decision, one could be forgiven for thinking the UK was on a path of withdrawal from interventionism. However, the insurgency of so-called Islamic State from 2014 contributed to a revival of UK military intervention, and public support for intervention in turn. What this revival represents for long-term attitudes towards interventionism will be analysed in this section.

Chilcot Inquiry

The Chilcot Report, published in 2016, sealed negative public attitudes towards the UK's involvement in Iraq and against military intervention more generally. 34% of respondents to one poll said that Tony Blair should be tried for war crimes, with 55% saying Blair deserves criticism but should not be pursued through the courts[92]. Spanning the breadth of policy decisions surrounding the Iraq War from 2001 to 2009, the report's remit was to examine what happened and to learn lessons so governments are equipped to respond to similar situations in future. It covers the background to the decision to go to war, whether troops were properly prepared, how the conflict was conducted and what planning there was for its aftermath[93].

The inquiry found that the decision to invade was made in unsatisfactory circumstances, saying the process for deciding that the war was legal was 'perfunctory', while 'no formal record was made of that decision, and the precise grounds on which it was made remains unclear'[94].

Further, the inquiry found that the Bush administration repeatedly ignored advice from the UK on how to oversee Iraq after the invasion, including the involvement of the UN, the control of Iraqi oil money and the extent to which better security should be put at the heart of the military operation[95].

Iran, North Korea and Libya were found to be considered greater threats in terms of their nuclear, chemical and biological weapons proliferation, and the UK joint intelligence committee believed it would take Iraq five years, after the lifting of sanctions, to produce enough fissile material for a weapon[96].

The Chilcot report also criticises the Blair government for a lack of post-invasion strategy[97]. Blair did not identify which ministers were responsible for post-war planning and strategy. The Bush administration appointed ambassador Paul Bremer to head a new coalition provisional authority in Baghdad. The UK, according to the Chilcot report, had no input into subsequent decisions taken by Bremer, including the dissolving of Saddam's army

and security structures, which alienated the Sunni community and fed the subsequent jihadist insurgency.

At the time of UK withdrawal in 2009, Iraq was gripped by sectarian division, rows over oil revenues, and rampant corruption inside Iraqi government ministries. **No evidence had been found that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction**. Prior to invasion, Blair had said that the US-led invasion coalition would try to minimise civilian casualties[98]. During the war, the Ministry of Defence made only a broad estimate of how many Iraqis were being killed. Estimates put the figure at anywhere between 100,000 and 600,000 Iraqis[99].

In sum, the Inquiry proved what was already suspected by large proportions of the public – that the Blair government had not been truthful in their reasons for invasion, that they had allied too closely with the US, and that they lacked a substantial plan for longer-term involvement and post-Saddam Hussein strategy. Indeed**, half of those questioned in a 2013 YouGov poll said they believed Blair deliberately set out to mislead the British public about the threat posed by WMD**, and only 31% think that Blair genuinely believed Saddam Hussein possessed a stockpile of WMD**. 22% said Blair knowingly misled parliament and the public and should be tried as a war criminal over the conflict[100]**. Having been commissioned by Gordon Brown in 2009, it is likely that discussion and public awareness of the inquiry fed into negative public attitudes towards UK involvement in Syria in 2013, as the case study suggests many similar factors were at play.

Building on the public resentment towards intervention that the Chilcot report fuelled were allegations of misconduct and failure in Afghanistan. The extent of this was detailed in the '**Afghanistan papers'** published in December 2019. Focusing particularly on the role of the US, the papers reveal a 'combination of hubris and ignorance, and with a political leadership…more concerned with domestic politics than the impact of their decisions on Afghanistan' contributed to the failure of stabilisation and state building efforts in the country[101].

No doctrine of disengagement

The shadow of the Chilcot Inquiry and debates over UK military involvement in Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Syria again, would likely have contributed to a 'war fatigue' amongst both the public and Parliament. Parliament's rejection of airstrikes on Syria in 2013 can be viewed as a manifestation of this effect. Indeed, according to an Opinium/Observer poll, **71% of voters said they felt that recent military actions in Libya, Afghanistan and Iraq had made them less likely to back other UK interventions abroad** (47% of Conservative voters and 58% of Labour voters)[102].

However, events of 2014 and 2015 contradict this argument. Whilst there might have been some level of war fatigue, this has not necessary been part of a wider doctrine of disengagement amongst the public.

The insurgency of so-called Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS) from 2014 brought with it particularly horrific acts of violence and oppression against Syrians and Iraqis, but also across the Western world through terrorist attacks, including the UK, in London and Manchester. Citizens of Western nations went to join the group, including some 900 British citizens[103], and others were kidnapped, contributing to the sense that ISIS were very much a problem for western governments, including the UK.

The growing threat of ISIS and their considerable territorial gains made in Iraq and Syria contributed to a shift in British public opinion towards military action against the group.

A YouGov survey of 2014 reported support levels of **60% for RAF airstrikes against ISIS in Iraq, 30% support for sending regular UK troops to fight against Iraqi and Kurdish forces, 68% support for sending special forces to rescue hostages and 63% support for sending a handful of UK military advisers to help train and advise Iraqi and Kurdish forces** in the fight against ISIS[104]. 69% said they would favour sending humanitarian supplies to civilians in Syria via charities entering by road, with 78% favouring doing so by air.

The extent of negative attitudes towards ISIS were compounded by the fact that 52% of the public said they would support cooperating with Iran to fight ISIS in Syria in October 2014, and 49% would support cooperating with Russia[105]. However, **only 20% said they would support sending regular troops to fight alongside Western-backed forces in Syria, and 30% would support the same in Iraq.**

On 26th September 2014 David Cameron secured a large parliamentary majority (524 to 43) for UK military intervention in Iraq to combat ISIS.

However, the public maintained a level of wariness towards involvement in the Syrian civil war more generally, giving credence to the hypothesis that the public are averse to involvement in conflict that they view as intransigent and complex. Respondents to the YouGov survey above were relatively supportive of widening operations against ISIS into Syria, but **39% opposed this if it extended to taking sides in the Syrian civil war**, like targeting the Assad regime (36% support), or cooperating with it (37% support)[106]. This support can be linked to public regret for not acting in Syria in 2013 – YouGov note that in 2013 **74% of British people said MP's decision not to take military action in Syria was the right thing to do** – but this figure fell to 42% in November 2015[107].

Non-governmental voices were much more critical of these interventions, with Dr Neil Quilliam of Chatham House urging Western governments to 'prioritise supporting local governance initiatives', as airstrikes would 'risk undermining any shred of credibility the UK may still have'[108]. He emphasized the difference in the scale of suffering caused by ISIS compared to chemical weapons attacks, saying:

"A decision by the UK parliament to now endorse military operations would send a clear message that the UK is happy to intervene against ISIS when its citizens are killed on a beach in Tunisia, but unwilling to do so when chemical weapons are used against Syrians."[109]

YouGov have commented that ISIS did a lot to counteract the draining effect of the Iraq War on British support for military intervention[110]. For example, **37% of respondents to a 2014 poll supported RAF strikes** against ISIS in Syria, but this figure **jumped to 48% a week later after the release of a video of the beheading of an Israeli-American journalist[111]. Support rose to a peak of 60% in September 2015**, dropping to 48% in December 2015, which YouGov attribute to Jeremy Corbyn's public opposition of the strikes. YouGov polled respondents on Jeremy Corbyn's statement on 'the connections between wars our government has supported or fought in other countries and terrorism here at home', and the majority (53%) agreed that 'wars the UK has supported or fought ARE responsible, at least in part, for terror attacks against the UK'.

Subsequent engagements

Cameron's success in gaining Parliamentary approval for intervention in Iraq to combat ISIS in September 2014 marked a swift turnaround from his defeat in August 2013. Kaarbo and Kenealy suggest this vote was easier to win as the Iraqi government had requested assistance, and the US had already committed their involvement[112]. However, James Strong suggests that the Government win was due *only* to the fact that they had made substantial concessions in order to win Labour's support, such as committing to fighting ISIS in Iraq but not in Syria[113].

Despite this concession, in December 2015 **Cameron won Parliament's approval to extend the airstrikes in Iraq to Syria, by 397 to 223 votes[114].** RAF Tornado aircraft conducted the first operation in Syria on 3rd December 2015. It is likely that internal dynamics within the Labour Party contributed to Cameron's success, as Hilary Benn, then Shadow Foreign Secretary, led an 'internationalist' rebellion against Jeremy Corbyn's anti-interventionism.

In 2015, David Cameron authorised drone strikes in Raqqa which killed Reyaad Khan and Junaid Hussain, two British citizens that were fighting with ISIS[115]. Despite not seeking Parliamentary approval, Cameron argued he had complied with the War Powers Convention (a convention whereby the House of Commons would have the opportunity to debate the deployment of military forces, prior to doing so, except in the event of an emergency), which maintains that in the face of an urgent threat 'you could act immediately and explain to the House of Commons afterwards'[116].

Three years later, in April 2018, the UK, US and France conducted joint airstrikes in Syria in response to the suspected use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime in Douma, which reportedly killed 75 people and injured up to 500[117]. The government's published legal position said that the UK airstrikes specifically targeted the regime's chemical weapons capability and were aimed at deterring future chemical weapons attacks. The airstrikes were not given prior approval by Parliament although they were debated in Parliament afterwards[118].

Public support was relatively limited, with YouGov reporting that **only 22% of Britons would support a cruise missile attack against the Syrian military, and 43% would oppose (34% don't know)[119]**. However, **61% of respondents agreed that 'there probably was an attack using chemical weapons, carried out by Syrian government forces or their allies'.** This demonstrates a gap of nearly 40% of respondents that do not view chemical weapons attacks, at least the attack in this instance, as a crime that is worthy of UK intervention. More people supported a humanitarian approach, with 50% supporting the option to send in British and allied troops to protect civilians, and 51% favouring a shorter intervention of sending troops to depose Assad.

The increasing role of Parliament

One conclusion that can be drawn for the case studies' investigation is the increasing level of public support for the involvement of Parliament in decisions of military action. A majority of respondents to the YouGov poll above reported that **the Government should only take military action after approval from Parliament, including for a range of measures**, such as declaring war, deploying regular troops, enforcing no-fly zones, supplying arms and conducting drone strikes[120].

However, Kaarbo and Kenealy warn against drawing conclusions about the strengthening institutional or legal capacity of Parliament following the Iraq and Syria votes[121]. In 2019, for example, the government did not call a Commons vote for the deployment of military assets and personnel (in non-combat roles) to Mali. Further, UK action in Libya in 2011 was authorised by Parliament but the vote occurred only after the intervention had begun. Theresa May's airstrikes on Syria in 2018 were not voted on by Parliament. Kaarbo and Kenealy conclude that different Prime Ministers may feel increasing political pressure to hold a vote ahead of the deployment of military force, but they are by no means constitutionally obliged to do so[122].

Following the Government's defeat on Syria in 2013, RUSI's Malcolm Chalmers noted 'it is difficult to see [parliament's support] being given unless there is a clear national interest involved, or if military operations are undertaken with the imprimatur of a UN Security Council mandate'.[123]

James Strong suggests that the Iraq vote set the precedent, the Libya vote confirmed and applied the precedent, and the Syria vote firmly established the convention of MPs having veto power over intervention.[124]

Further, George Eaton notes that despite William Hague's commitment to enshrine Parliamentary consultation on military action in law never being fulfilled, there is now an expectation that MPs will be consulted before 'significant British military action', although not in emergency situations[125]. The difficulty lies in how 'significant military action' is defined, as evidently military action that has occurred since, and not been sanctioned by

Parliament, has either been deemed an emergency (as in Syria in 2018) or not significant (as in Mali).

Kaarbo and Kenealy take a more nuanced view, arguing that it is security issues that are salient to the public, and public opinion that challenges the government's preference, that can facilitate parliamentary influence in security policy[126]. They suggest that MPs that aren't serving in government may be more sensitive to public opinion and see public opposition as an opportunity to make electoral gains, particularly if an election is looming.

Most recently, the 2019 General Election campaign brought issues of Parliament's role in military intervention to the fore. The Labour Party promised to enact William Hague's proposal of legislating to always give Parliament a say on military action, through a 'War Powers Act' that would mean 'no prime minister can bypass Parliament to commit conventional military action.'[127]. For his part, Corbyn promised to end the 'bomb first, talk later' approach to security[128]. Jeremy Corbyn's stance on interventionism has been found to be popular amongst the public by YouGov[129].

The Liberal Democrats wrote in their own manifesto that 'the UK should only intervene militarily when there is a clear legal or humanitarian case, endorsed by a vote in parliament – working through international institutions whenever possible.'[130]. They promised to legislate to ensure a parliamentary vote before military action, although allowed space for intervention without a vote in cases of emergency or treaty obligation. The Conservatives made no mention in their manifesto of giving Parliament further powers to legislate on military action.

Strong suggests that the question as to whether a government faces punishment for bypassing the War Powers Convention will depend on how salient the proposed deployment is to MPs[131]. Whether a military operation looks salient will depend in turn on the nature of the deployment proposed and on public opinion.

5. Demographic Breakdowns

How do different subsections of the public view military intervention? Generally, Conservative voters are more supportive, as are men, and older voters. When it comes to the Iraq War, these figures are slightly different, as figures quoted earlier in this paper found that opposition to the Iraq War actually increases with age.

Eichenberg and Stoll (2017), in their analysis of public attitudes towards defence spending across fourteen nations find a consistent, significant impact of gender on attitudes toward war, and as a consequence, opinions of defence spending[132].

In response to a poll gauging public opinion towards the Government airstrikes in response to the Syrian regime's chemical weapons attacks, Conservative voters were the most evenly split on support/opposition, with 34% in opposition and 33% in support[133]. Only **14% of women noted support for missile attacks, with 47% opposed, compared to figures of 31% of men supporting, and 40% opposed.**

On opinions towards the Forces, graduates tend to have a slightly lower opinion, with 79% of graduates declaring a 'high' or 'very high' opinion of the Armed Forces in BSA's survey, compared to 87% of those with no qualifications[134]. **91% of Conservative voters declare a 'very high' or 'high' opinion of the Armed Forces, compared to 90% of Labour voters**, 90% of Liberal Democrats, and 80% of others. 15% of Labour voters say their opinion is 'neither high nor low' compared to 8% of Conservatives. The responses reveal only small gender differences.

However, those who held the armed forces in low esteem were more likely to oppose the missions in Iraq and Afghanistan than those who have warmer feelings towards the forces, according to Berndtsson et al[135], although oppositions to military operations abroad did not automatically generate a decline in the opinion of the institutions or its personnel, as over 90% indicate support for recently serving military personnel.

It is important to note that, with reference to the manifestos and rhetoric surrounding the December 2019 General Election campaign, military intervention has become a distinctly more partisan and divisive issue. With the shift to the left of the Labour Party, and the Conservative Party's efforts to sweep up Brexit Party voters, two distinct options on military intervention have been presented to the public. This marks a shift from the era of the Iraq War, where both parties were in favour of UK intervention. Of course, the Labour Party voted against intervention in Syria in 2013, but subsequently voted for action against ISIS in 2014 and 2015.

These demographic breakdowns will likely become more important and play into future party positions on military intervention. As older men tend to be more supportive of military action, and those with fewer qualifications more supportive of the Armed Forces in general, we can expect to see a continuation of the current Labour-Conservative divide on military intervention, with Labour and the Liberal Democrats urging care and international authorisation for action in their attempts to woo younger voters. The Conservatives, for

their part, are likely to be quieter on issues of intervention and continue with big pledges for veterans – such as their pledge to amend the Human Rights Act so as not to apply to veterans that served during the Troubles in Northern Ireland[136].

6. Current state of public opinion

The case studies provide us with a number of conclusions on public opinion towards UK military intervention. It is important to note that public opinion is constantly evolving, and the polarised nature of our society means that generalised snapshots of public opinion mask deep divides between different demographic groups and their opinion on intervention, as noted in Chapter 5. The form that future UK military action might take in future is uncertain and subject to change. However, nearly seventeen years on from the invasion of Iraq, it is evident the public mood has shifted.

1. The 'will to fight' is present, but more limited than before Iraq

It is clear that despite a revival of public support for military intervention in 2014/15 against ISIS, generally, levels of approval for military intervention are lower than the pre-Iraq period.

To gauge whether the UK public still has the 'will to fight', YouGov asked respondents various questions about hypothetical UK action against Boko Haram. They concluded that the public do still have the will to fight, and definitely the will to provide humanitarian assistance, but that people are now more afraid of sending service people, and picking sides in foreign wars[137].

This is illustrated in the data examined earlier in this report, for example the wide gap between those in 2018 that believed that there probably was a chemical weapons attack carried out by the Syrian government or their allies (61%), and those that would support a missile attack against the Syrian military (22%). Compared to the average of 54% that thought the decision to go to war in Iraq was right (between March and December 2003), this represents a reduction in support for military intervention.

Still, in 2017, **51% of Britons said they would support British military involvement in Syria alongside other Western countries,** according to a Sky Data poll. **51% of respondents to the poll said that the UK has a responsibility to do what it can to protect people in Syria, while 31% said it does not**[138]. This suggests that there is still a will amongst a majority of the British public to engage internationally, but perhaps more responsibly than in Iraq.

2. Trends towards withdrawal

UK involvement in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria has acted as a drag on the public's willingness to engage in any foreign conflict, as can be seen in the graph below. Instead, gauges of public opinion indicate higher bars for the approval of intervention than existed before Iraq. Indeed, responses to the Opinium/Observer poll quoted earlier in this paper found that 71% of voters said they felt that recent military actions in Libya, Afghanistan and Iraq had made them less likely to back other UK interventions abroad.

When asked what role they would like to see the UK playing in 2014, **37% of respondents said 'we should stop trying to protect international influence and just concentrate on issues at home'** and **22% said the UK should either seek to be a global power that can influence events around the world**, or a regional power that tries to influence events only within its own region of the world[139].
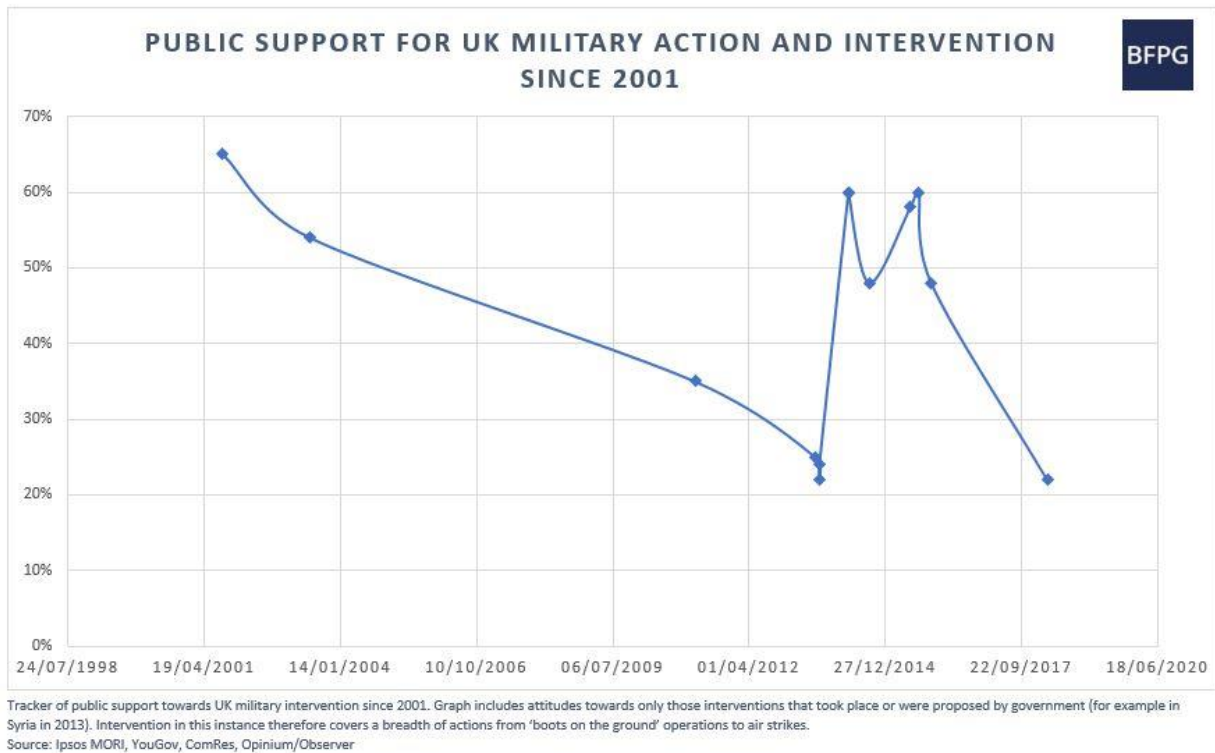
A YouGov poll from November 2018 found that **52% of adults in the UK oppose military intervention overseas.** Only 27% disagreed with the policy of 'my country not taking part in military interventions in other countries'[140].

One of the most recent gauges of public opinion towards a specific military intervention are the assessments of public support for the government's airstrikes in Syria in April 2018. Public support was relatively limited, as noted above. More people supported a humanitarian approach, with **50% supporting the option to send in British and allied troops to protect civilians**, and 51% favouring a shorter intervention of sending troops to depose Assad[141].

Further, despite the 'revival' of public attitudes towards intervention that was witnessed in light of the threat of the Islamic State, YouGov noted in 2014 that a massive **75% of respondents would oppose sending British and American troops into Iraq to fight alongside the Iraqi army** – an illustration of the public's aversion to boots on the ground, no matter what the cause.

However, it is clear that ISIS did have something of a 'revival effect' on public support for military intervention – figures quoted earlier in this paper show that only **9% of the public supported sending British troops to Syria in 2013, but this figure jumped to 20% in 2014** when respondents were given the option to send troops to fight against ISIS.

The above suggests first that a proportion of the public do not support military intervention – in this case in the form of boots on the ground - even in cases where a government has committed a mass atrocity, an instance where foreign intervention is authorised – in principle – under international law. It does also suggest a wider level of **public support for humanitarian intervention**, especially when taken with the figure in point 1 that noted 51% believe the UK has a responsibility to do what it can to protect people in Syria. Indeed, more respondents to the 2014 YouGov poll on support for defeating ISIS found higher levels of support for 'light touch' involvement, such as providing arms to the Iraqi government (49%) and providing military air support for the Iraqi government (51%)[142].

PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR UK MILITARY ACTION AND INTERVENTION SINCE 2001

Tracker of public support towards UK military intervention since 2001. Graph includes attitudes towards only those interventions that took place or were proposed by government (for example in Syria in 2013). Intervention in this instance therefore covers a breadth of actions from 'boots on the ground' operations to air strikes.
Source: Ipsos MORI, YouGov, ComRes, Opinium/Observer

3. Concern over picking sides and lengthy involvement

Point 2 noted that the public now have 'higher bars' for approving UK military intervention. One such bar, likely a direct result of UK involvement in Iraq, is intervention where the risks are relatively high compared to the reward. In the 2013 Syria vote, for example, there was a perceived risk amongst the public of the UK becoming involved in a drawn-out conflict, and the associated risks to Armed Forces personnel that accompany that**. 51% of those who opposed military action in Syria in 2013 in a YouGov survey thought that a limited missile attack 'would probably have ended up with Britain being dragged into further military action and British troops having to go into Syria'[143]. **A YouGov poll quoted earlier in this paper found that 39% opposed widening ISIS operations in Iraq into Syria if it extended to taking sides in the civil war.

Relatedly, the public wariness to picking sides in foreign wars is a facet of public attitudes that has continued over time – where the good and bad sides are not clearly demarcated or are largely unknown, for example in Syria and Libya, the public are reluctant for the Armed Forces to get too involved. In scenarios where this is not the case, for example against ISIS, the public have shown to be much more supportive. Only 9% of the public supported sending British troops to Syria in 2013. In Iraq in 2014, 30% supported sending regular UK troops to fight with Iraqi and Kurdish forces, compared to a much larger 68% that supported sending special forces to rescue hostages.

Further, 66% of the public regard chemical warfare as an 'especially horrific a crime against humanity' rather than 'a terrible thing, but no worse than other forms of killing' (26% support).

This can be related to the levels of public support for humanitarian action in conflict – whilst they tend to oppose deeper involvement in the conflict, the public have shown support for helping people in Syria, suggesting that they do not favour an isolationist stance, but rather **a more thoughtful, humanitarian approach**. Indeed, in 2014, 41% of respondents to a YouGov survey said British foreign policy should be based at least in part on ethical considerations and 42% said the national interest should take precedence[144].

4. Confusion over what authorisation is

It is clear from this report's review of public opinion towards UK military intervention that there is a significant level of confusion amongst members of the public surrounding what the UK's international obligations are in terms of this action and international law.

Polling surrounding the government's decision to retaliate to the 2018 suspected chemical weapons attack by Assad on Douma in Syria illustrates this confusion. **Whilst 61% of respondents agreed that 'there probably was an attack using chemical weapons, carried out by Syrian government forces or their allies', only 50% supported sending in British and allied troops to protect civilians**. It is important to note that this figure was much higher than previous levels of support for sending British troops into conflict zones. However, it does not match the higher percentage of those that believed Assad was behind the chemical weapons attack. The use of chemical weapons is a war crime and is prohibited in a series of international treaties, including the Chemical Weapons Convention, the Statute of the International Criminal Court, the Geneva Gas Protocol and the Hague Declaration[145].

In answer to this puzzle, Strong has suggested that the public and parliament alike will back military action only if they think it is consistent with a fairly conservative account of Britain's global role, if it looks both necessary and justifiable under international law, and if they think it will work[146].

Berndtsson et al report 75% of the public as being 'interventionist' in stance, especially when strategic interests are at stake or when human rights abuses warrant it[147].

On what kind of authorisation they would like to see for UK intervention, **45% of respondents said that the UK should only take military action with UN authorisation, while 42% said we should only act with NATO authorisation[148]**. In each case, roughly a third of respondents said we should be prepared to act without the respective authorisation. The majority of respondents to a YouGov poll quoted earlier in this paper said that the government should only take military action after approval from Parliament, including for a range of measures from drone strikes and enforcing no-fly zones, to sending troops.

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When asked what types of support or authorisation are most important to have when Britain takes military action, 31% selected 'majority approval by the UK Parliament' as their first choice; 16% selected NATO authorisation first; 14% selected the support of key Western allies, and 13% selected UN authorisation[149].

In terms of knowledge of what intervention entails, public knowledge is lacking. A 2018 YouGov survey asked respondents 'what does it mean when military action is officially authorised by the UN?' and only 7% of respondents selected the correct answer[150]. When asked what it means when military action has been authorised by NATO, only 19% came close to the correct answer, and 31% didn't know.

5. General attitudes towards the armed forces

Whilst public attitudes towards UK military intervention are up for debate, public support for the Armed Forces remains very high, with 88% of respondents to the Ministry of Defence's Public Opinion Survey of 2017 reporting a very favourable or a mainly favourable opinion of the UK Armed Forces, and 92% agreeing that the UK Armed Forces keep Britain safe by providing security at home and abroad[151].

Further, Hansard's 2019 Audit of Political Engagement found that 74% of the public had most confidence in the military to act in the best interests of the public[152].

Between 2005 and 2017, 'favourable' opinions of the Armed Forces have increased from 54% and 88%. Those having a 'very favourable' impression have increased from 14% to 61%[153].

As quoted earlier in this paper, despite generally negative attitudes to the Iraq War, 94% said 'regardless of what I think about the mission to Iraq, I support members of the UK Armed Forces who have recently served there'.

7. Conclusions

In general, support for military intervention has decreased since the turn of the century.

In 2003 from March to December, prior to and during the invasion of Iraq, an average of 54% of people thought that the decision to go to war was right[154].

Since then, support for the war waned. In 2012, a year after the withdrawal of British troops from Iraq, 58% of the public said that the UK was wrong to go to war in Iraq – a strong shift from the majority that thought the war was right in 2003[155]. By 2012, as detailed earlier in this report, the UK government's justifications for war had not withstood the test of time, and Britain had become embroiled in a lengthy conflict, which had destabilised Iraq and cost British and Iraqi lives. The publication of the Chilcot Report consolidated this sentiment amongst the public.

The waning support amongst the public for military intervention was detailed in the poll, discussed previously, by Opinium for the Observer in 2013, in which 71% of voters said they felt that recent military actions in Libya, Afghanistan and Iraq had made them less likely to back other UK interventions abroad[156].

As detailed in Chapter 4, public attitudes towards UK military intervention saw an improvement in 2014/2015 with the insurgency of ISIS. In 2014, 60% of voters said they would support RAF airstrikes against ISIS in Iraq, and 30% said they would support sending regular troops.

This spike in approval has not translated to general support for any military intervention, and attitudes remain relatively low compared to their 2003 levels. In 2018, for example, only 22% of Britons said they would support a missile attack against Syria, even though 61% agreed that 'there probably was an attack using chemical weapons, carried out by government forces or their allies'[157].

In November 2018, a full 52% of adults in the UK said they support 'my country not taking part in military interventions in other countries, with only 27% opposed[158].

The growing role of Parliament in the authorisation of military intervention has meant that public attitudes towards intervention are of increasing importance. MPs are less likely to sanction an intervention that does not have strong public support – as in Syria in 2013. The increasing role of Parliament will likely bring a more frequent clash between foreign and defence policy – as we have seen in the disjuncture between the UK supporting the UN-led peace process in Yemen, but supporting Saudi Arabia's military campaign in the country by providing it with arms. Despite the December election returning a strong majority for the Conservatives, the prominence of other parties' policies around curbing the executive's power on intervention during the election campaign suggests that this is an issue that is not going away.

Further, it is important to note that despite this downward shift in public opinion, the Government continues to spend money on defence and in countering global threats, for

example by continuing to fulfil its defence spending commitment of 2% of GDP for NATO, something that all of the main parties in the election campaign have promised to maintain. In 2017, UK defence spending as a proportion of GDP was 2.12%, US 3.5%, France 1.79%, Germany 1.24%, Italy 1.1%, Spain 0.92%[159]. Large-scale, public wars make up a small part of UK foreign policy, as the UK continues to adapt to evolving global threats such as the rise of Russia and 'the rest' and the evolving nature of warfare.

Our findings demonstrate a downward shift in public support for UK military intervention abroad. This shift in public opinion, together with the increasing strength of Parliament as a veto player for military intervention, may well play a role in shaping future defence policy. In the wake of the EU referendum, the public are becoming more vocal and more divided on a range of issues, and it is shaping policy in turn. As public opinion plays a more central role in government policymaking, we may see these relatively negative opinions towards military intervention affecting defence decisions. Either way, our government presides over an ever more contested landscape than the one Blair faced in 2003.

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