Causes of the uk's decision to participate in the iraq invasion

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The US-UK led invasion of Iraq led to the United Kingdom fighting in a short, but successful, twenty-one day war against Saddam Hussein's regime.[1]The coalition forces were then involved in a difficult and lengthy insurgency war, this essay will outline three reasons why the UK participated and will then establish major consequences of the decision made by the incumbent UK government to both Iraq and the UK itself. The primary reason for why the UK participated was the belief that Saddam Hussein had the capacity and intention to use weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). In a pre-war speech to the House of Commons, the UK Prime Minister (PM) Tony Blair said, ' The intelligence is clear, Saddam continues to believe his WMD programme is essential both for internal repression and for external aggression.'[2]Secondly, the US government deemed a regime change in Iraq was necessary as they undertook their war on terror and the essay will look at how this influenced the UK decision to participate. Thirdly, it is beneficial to scrutinise the special relationship between the UK and the US to answer the question as to why the UK participated.[3]Although the topic is complex, this essay will focus on consequences to Iraq, such as the human casualties suffered, the long-term destabilisation that has replaced Saddam Hussein's regime and the dire economic and social effects. In terms of consequences to the UK, it is important to look at the substantial financial cost and human casualties, while a major impact on the UK is an enduring lack of trust in British politics that has affected foreign policy.

Pre-2003, the US claimed to have clear evidence that the Iraqi government was developing and capable of using weapons of mass destruction.[4]The UK

actively supported the American stance on Iraq, this combined with Saddam Hussein's history of having used chemical weapons against the Iranians in the Iran-Iraq War 1980-88 and the Kurds in Halabja in 1988, was enough to convince Tony Blair and the UK government that these weapons existed and Iraq had the capacity to utilise them.[5]Tony Blair took the view that Iraq was an immediate threat, evidenced in 2002 by the UK Prime Ministers staunchly held view that, ' we must be prepared to act where terrorism or weapons of mass destruction threatens.'[6]In November 2002, UN resolution 1441 was put in place to allow weapons inspectors to search Iraq for WMDs. It would allow ' immediate, unconditional and unrestricted access' to all facilities in the country including military and presidential premises.[7]Saddam Hussein refused to fully co-operate with the UN inspectors and this allowed the UK to justify the decision to go to war with Iraq by suggesting his refusal supported the intelligence that WMDs must exist. In hindsight, we know the WMDs did not exist, it is evident that the decision made was one of flawed intelligence assessments that went unchallenged.[8]The UK and US did not have the support of the United Nations security council, predominantly France and Russia, in the decision to take up armed conflict as they believed that the Iraqi regime should have more time to allow weapon inspections.[9]

Secondly, regime change influenced the UK decision as the US government believed Saddam Hussein was a tyrant and needed to be removed as part of their war on global terror. Although Tony Blair was morally convinced that regime change in Iraq was necessary, just as he had overseen in Afghanistan, Kosovo and Sierra Leone, he maintained it was not the reason the UK needed to participate. He knew that regime change in isolation was

not a just reason for entering the war, as it is not a legal argument. The WMD argument accompanied Blair's belief in regime change in Iraq, and even after UK military action had begun, the issue of removing a dictator was used in a secondary role to justify the war. It would then go on to be the primary justification once removing Saddam Hussein failed to produce proof of WMDs.[10]This argument was then strengthened when the importance Blair put on regime change as a moral duty was made clear in March 2003; when discussing attempts at a fresh UN resolution he stated, ' give Saddam one final chance to comply; and make it clear if he didn't, then we would act, if necessary by force.'[11]Blair is threatening Saddam Hussein to change policies or be removed, not to change policies or he'll be forced to change. Post war, the analysis has been damning of the UK government's assessment of the Iraqi regime, and although there is a view that military action might have been necessary in the future, on the 20th March 2003 there wasn't an immediate threat from Baghdad.[12]

A third cause for the UK participating in Iraq was the importance placed on the special relationship it held with the United States. Sir John Chilcot stated the relationship was a ' determining factor' in the UK's decision.[13]There were two main issues that concerned the UK, should they take the decision not to support the US. Firstly, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Tony Blair publicly said ' we in Britain stand shoulder to shoulder with our American friends', this was reinforced by the allied action in Afghanistan[14]. It was felt that taking a different stance on Iraq would severely damage the UK-US long term relationship. The second issue was that if support wasn't given to the US then it would have a detrimental effect on the strategic alliance of the

nations, most importantly, foreign policy and security. So full support was given as Blair was convinced that UK military support was vital for not only the UK relationship with the US, but for the future American relationship with the world. He argued the decision would ' determine the pattern of international politics for the next generation'.[15]Although the UK government were correct to factor in any effect the decision had on the important UK-US relationship, Blair did not have to give unconditional and full support to ensure the relationship was maintained. In the Iraq Inquiry, Sir John Chilcot shows that, historically, shared morals and vitally shared interests have meant the relationship has stayed strong even when opinions have contrasted. He gives examples such as Vietnam, Northern Ireland and Israel to cement this conclusion. As the UK had a differing, not opposed position on Iraq, it almost certainly would not have led to a long-term change in the UK's relationship with the US.[16]

Assessing the consequences of the UK's decision to participate, the Iraq War's effects have been substantial and enduring to both Iraq itself and the United Kingdom, albeit for differing reasons. Iraq suffered a heavy humanitarian impact, highlighted by the conflict death toll that stands at approximately 405, 000 with 60% of post war deaths directly attributable to violence.[17]Perhaps the most apparent consequence of the war on Iraq is the destabilisation of the country, the conflict crippled Iraq as a power in the Middle East.[18]A sensitive balance of power was held between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims and this was shattered triggering a sectarian power struggle throughout Iraq and the middle eastern region.[19]An effective way to demonstrate this is to examine the war's impact on the Iraqi port city of

Basra. After UK forces entered the city on April 6th in 2003, they were responsible for the upkeep of law and order, an effective control was vital to stave off civilian resentment with the British occupiers. This proved a sizeable task as looting proved relentless and led to a British commander in Basra, Brigadier Graham Binns, stating, ' the best way to stop looting was to get to a point where there was nothing left to loot'.[20]In the time since Basra transitioned to provincial Iraqi control in 2007, the city has fallen under control of militias and gangs with soaring cases of kidnapping, armed robberies and brutal tribal disputes. In a further display of instability and social discontent, many Iraqi's believe Iranian interference is to blame as they fight a proxy war in the region. In 2018 protesters set fire to the Iranian consulate in Basra as they believe the responsibility for a lack of money, services and jobs lies at the door of Tehran. The Iraq inquiry was uncomplimentary for the UK's lack of vision and preparation as they failed to consider the magnitude of the task of stabilising and reconstructing Iraq, and of the responsibilities that would fall upon the UK in the aftermath.[21]

There were also adverse consequences to the UK, financially the war cost an estimated £8. 4 billion pounds and 179 servicemen and women were lost during the war and following insurgency war, with most at the hands of IED's and roadside bombs.[22]There were also lasting negative effects on health as many returned home physically wounded or suffering PTSD, deployment to Iraq demonstratively increased the likelihood of mental health conditions among those who served there.[23]Another enduring consequence of the war is the lack of trust in UK politics and foreign policy, a clear example of this is the decision not to engage in military intervention in Syria in 2013.

MP's, sensitive to public opinion, voted down motions for military intervention in Syria as the fallout from the war in Iraq has left the British population dissatisfied with parliaments ability to make the correct decisions. [24]This lack of action, against the view of the US, has not hampered the special relationship held between Britain and America. Demonstrating that failing to intervene in Iraq would not have been detrimental to the relationship back in 2003.

To conclude, clearly it is not possible to deal with all the issues in an essay this length with a topic of this complexity. Accordingly, three major reasons as to why the United Kingdom decided to participate in the Iraq War have been explained. The belief that Saddam Hussein possessed and had the inclination to use weapons of mass destruction, based on what is now known to be flawed intelligence, and therefore needed to be removed from power were primary to this. As Tony Blair believed that the preservation of the relationship between the UK and the US was vital, the US desire of regime change in Iraq heavily influenced the route taken by the British PM. This is starkly evidenced by an infamous pre-war memo from Blair to US President Bush, released post-war, where Blair states, ' I will be with you, whatever.'[25]The impact is still being felt among Iraqi's today as there is clear evidence of devastating economic and social consequences resulting from the removal of Saddam Hussein. On top of the financial and human cost of the war, the broader picture for the UK sees a lack of public support in recent British foreign policy, such as military intervention in Syria. This has meant a more isolationist approach has been taken by the United Kingdom.

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[1]Keegan (2005), p. 1.

[2]Blair, HC Deb 25 February 2003, vol 400, col 123.

[3]Chilcot Report (2016), p. 5.

4 Coates and Krieger (2004), p. 34.

[5]Israeli (2004), p. 163.

[6]Blair, UK PM, quoted in Lee (2012), p. 45.

[7]UN Resolution 1441 (2002), p. 2.

[8]English (2013), p. 109.

[9]Lee (2012), p. 110.

[10]Coates and Krieger (2004), p. 72.

[11]Blair, UK PM, quoted in Lee (2012), p. 113

[12]Chilcot, Liaison Committee, *Oral Evidence: Follow up to the Chilcot Report* , (HC 2016).

[13]Chilcot Report (2016), p. 51.

[14]Blair, UK Prime Minister, quoted in Coates and Krieger (2004), p. 44.

[15]Blair, HC Deb 18 March 2003, vol 401, col 761.

[16]Chilcot Report (2016), p. 53.

[17]Hagopian et al. (2016), pp. 1-7.

[18]Israeli (2004), p. 239.

[19]Betts (2013), pp. 89-90.

[20]Binns, Commander of 7 Armoured Brigade, quoted in Chilcot Report (2016), p. 91.

[21]Chilcot Report (2016), p. 134.

[22]British Fatalities: Operations in Iraq (2019),

https://www. gov. uk/government/fields-of-operation/iraq .

[23]Defence Committee, *Mental Health and the Armed Forces: Part One,* (HC 2018) para 15.

[24]Kaarbo and Kenealy (2015), p. 32-33.

[25]Note Blair [to Bush], ' Note on Iraq' (2002).