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The Secret US-UK Airwar Against Iraq

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The Chilcot Inquiry, set up to look into the British role in the war in Iraq, reported on July 6, and although it was overshadowed by the political fallout from the Brexit vote to leave the European Union, received a largely favorable reception from the media and commentators. It is unclear why those commentators judged it to be "hard-hitting" because in terms of its conclusions all it did was tell us what we already knew.

Then British Prime Minister Tony Blair pursued a war that was arguably illegal has had disastrous consequences, not least for the 179 British servicemen and women killed and their loved ones, but also for Iraq, its people and the fight against terrorism.

I was staggered by the rush to say the report was hard hitting. It wasn't. It simply laid out the facts in a narrative format and let the reader decide. Those facts were of course damning but I struggle to find anything in the report that a well informed reader of British newspapers wouldn't already know.

It was a very workmanlike narrative of what happened taken from secret documents and witness testimony and therefore providing far more detail than had been previously available but it was not anything like a proper inquiry in the real sense. It was more like a neutral court report than the solid analysis which was required, and what we actually got from the curiously much derided Butler report.

As a result of the Chilcot's failure to carry out any detailed analysis of the evidence presented to his inquiry, it completely missed the extensive and conclusive evidence of a ten-month illegal air war by Britain and the U.S. designed to provoke Saddam Hussein into giving the allies an excuse to go to war in Iraq.

All modern wars begin with an air war in which the enemy positions on the ground are "softened up" to make them easier to overcome. The Iraq War was no different in many ways. Except there was a difference. George W. Bush and Tony Blair didn't tell us it was happening.

So why does this matter now?

It matters because the Iraq War didn't begin on March 20, 2003 as everybody thought, it began ten months earlier on May 20, 2002 when the allies started the secret air war. It was definitely illegal because it started six months before the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1441 which Tony Blair's government later used to claim the war was legal.

(U.S. readers might also care to note that it started five months before Congress passed the so-called Iraq Resolution which authorized military action against Iraq.)

The secret air war, codenamed Operation Southern Force, was carried out under cover of the UN-authorized operation under which U.S. and RAF aircraft patrolled a so-called no-fly zone over southern Iraq to protect the Shia majority from Saddam's forces.

Lt.-Gen. Michael Moseley, the U.S. Air Force commander of allied air operations over Iraq, told a conference at Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada in July 2003 that during Operation Southern Force allied aircraft dropped more than 600 bombs on "391 carefully selected targets."

British and U.S. officials claimed at the time that the reason behind the increased air strikes carried out in the southern no-fly zone, was an increase in Iraqi attacks on allied aircraft. But Lt.-Gen. Moseley said the bombing of Iraqi positions in southern Iraq paved the way for the invasion and was the reason the allies were able to begin the ground campaign without first waging an extensive air war as they had done during the 1991 Gulf War.

Planning for the illegal air war began shortly after Tony Blair attended a summit with George Bush at the U.S. President's ranch in Crawford, Texas on April 6 and 7, 2002. Chilcot confirmed evidence from a Cabinet Office Briefing Paper leaked to me as part of the "Downing Street Memos" back in the spring of 2005 that Mr. Blair agreed at Crawford "to support military action to bring about regime change" in Iraq.

The British Prime Minister didn't waste any time sorting out what would happen next. Chilcot records that the very next day, April 8, 2002, Geoff Hoon, the U.K. Defense Secretary, called in Chief of Defense Staff Admiral Sir Michael Boyce (now Lord Boyce) and the Permanent Undersecretary at the Ministry of Defense (MoD) Sir Kevin Tebbit to discuss "military options" in Iraq.

Ten days later, Air Marshal Brian Burridge, Deputy Commander of RAF Strike Command, was sent to the U.S. to act as liaison with General Tommy Franks, commander of the U.S. Central Command, who would lead the invasion force. Now Sir Brian, he told the Chilcot Inquiry that he had a meeting with Gen. Franks shortly after arriving at Central Command's headquarters in Tampa, Florida, discussing the no-fly zones over Iraq "at some length."

Nine days later, on April 26, Franks flew to London with Burridge for discussions with the U.K. defense chiefs. The Chilcot Report says they talked about the patrols of the no-fly zones with details of the discussions "circulated on very limited distribution."

A week later, there was a top secret meeting in 10, Downing St. chaired by Blair and attended by Hoon, British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw and Adm. Boyce. The Chilcot Report notes briefly that "Mr. Blair had a meeting on Iraq with Mr. Straw, Mr. Hoon and Adm. Boyce on 2 May but there is no record of the discussion."

It's worth pointing out that the Downing Street note which describes that key meeting in such brazenly bare detail was initially provided to the Butler Inquiry which first looked at the intelligence provided to back the war in Iraq in 2004. So the cover-up goes back at least to then and in reality far beyond.

Three days later after that secretive Downing Street meeting, Donald Rumsfeld, U.S. Defense Secretary, flew to London for talks with Mr. Hoon, following which British officials

announced changes to the rules of engagement in the no-fly zones making it easier for allied aircraft to attack Iraqi military positions.

Simon Webb, then Mod policy director, told the Chilcot inquiry that the Americans had proposed "changing the nature of the no-fly zone, quite a lot of which we were persuaded about but which a part of we weren't persuaded about … and stood aside from."

As one of the Mod's most senior civil servants, Webb was spouting the sort of doublespeak of which the writers of BBC Television's *Yes, Minister* would have been very proud. The key words there are not "stood aside from" but "quite a lot of which we were persuaded about."

On 20 May 2002, allied aircraft began ramping up the number of attacks on Iraqi positions. Throughout the first few months of 2002, they had dropped barely any bombs on Iraq. But answers to parliamentary questions asked by Liberal Democrat MP Sir Menzies Campbell (now Lord Campbell), reveal that during those last ten days of May alone, U.S. and U.K. aircraft patrolling the southern no-fly zone dropped 7.3 tons of bombs on Iraqi positions.

Far from standing aside, as Webb claimed in his testimony to the Chilcot Inquiry, RAF aircraft dropped more than two thirds of those bombs, a total of 4.9 tons.

Throughout the summer of 2002, both British and U.S. aircraft continued to bomb southern Iraq under cover of the no-fly zone while Blair and Hoon insisted that nothing was happening. The Defense Secretary told a cabinet meeting on 20 June 2002 that "except for continuing patrols in the no-fly zones, no decisions have been taken in relation to military operations in Iraq."

During defense questions in the House of Commons on Monday 15 July 2002, Hoon told Labour MP Alice Mahon that: "Absolutely no decisions have been taken by the British Government in relation to operations in Iraq or anywhere near Iraq … I can assure the House that any such decision would be properly reported to the House."

The next day, Blair appeared before the Parliamentary Liaison Committee. Asked if the U.K. was "preparing for possible military action against Iraq," Blair replied: "No, there are no decisions which have been taken about military action."

Tony Blair and his Defense Secretary Geoff Hoon were able to claim throughout 2002 that no decision had been taken on military action because the truth of what was taking place in southern Iraq under cover of the UN-authorized no-fly zones was kept on an extremely tight "need to know" basis. Even fairly senior British officials believed the increased air strikes were simply the result of the relaxation of the rules of engagement.

A week later, on Tuesday 23 July 2002, Blair was due to have a meeting with his war cabinet. In preparation for that meeting, the Cabinet Office produced a briefing paper which was one of the Downing St. Memos leaked to me when I was on the *Sunday Times*. It warned the participants that: "When the Prime Minister discussed Iraq with President Bush at Crawford in April he said that the U.K. would support military action to bring about regime change."

This represented a problem for British policy-makers, the Cabinet Office briefing paper said.

> "We need now to … encourage the U.S. Government to place its military

> planning within a political framework, partly to forestall the risk that military action is precipitated in an unplanned way by, for example, an incident in the no fly zones," the briefing paper said. "This is particularly important for the U.K. because it is necessary to create the conditions in which we could legally support military action."

This is all the evidence we need to show that the air war was illegal. Those conditions in which Britain could legally support military action did not yet exist. They had to be created. So although it was clearly not known to the officials who drafted the briefing paper, RAF aircraft and for that matter RAF servicemen were already involved in military action against Iraq which was not legal under the U.K. interpretation of international law.

The minutes of that war cabinet meeting on July 23 became best known for comments by Sir Richard Dearlove, the then head of MI6, who had just returned from a trip to Washington DC to see his CIA counterpart George Tenet. He told the meeting that the intelligence was being "fixed around the policy" in America.

But Hoon said something even more interesting. U.S. aircraft overflying southern Iraq had begun "spikes of activity to put pressure on the regime." He did not mention that RAF aircraft were also taking part in the attacks. Presumably some of his colleagues in the war cabinet were unaware of that fact and the lack of an official record for the May 2 meeting suggests that both Blair and Hoon thought it sensible not to have the British participation on record.

The attacks continued through June, July and August with both U.S. and British aircraft carrying out increased bombing but nevertheless failing to provoke the Iraqis into a reaction which might give the allies an excuse for war.

The attacks needed to be ramped up still further.

On September 5 2002, more than 100 allied aircraft, both U.S. and British, attacked an Iraqi air defense facility in western Iraq on September 5, 2002, in what was believed to be a prelude to the infiltration of special forces into Iraq from Jordan. The RAF saw it as such a success that it was reported on the front page of the official publication *RAF News*.

During September, allied aircraft dropped 54.6 tons of munitions on southern Iraq of which 21.1 tons were dropped by RAF aircraft. In October, they dropped 17.7 tons of which 11.4 tons, roughly two-thirds, were British.

The Iraq Resolution authorizing U.S. military action against Iraq was not passed by Congress until the early hours of October 11, 2002, five months after the start of Operation Southern Force, the secret air war preparing the way for the invasion.

UN Security Council Resolution 1441, which the U.K. Government would later claim made the war legal, was not passed until November 8, 2002, six months after the secret air war began.

It was not until March 17, 2003 that British Attorney-General Lord Goldsmith formally confirmed that military action was legal on the basis of UN Security Council Resolution 1441. A day later, the British parliament backed U.K. military action in Iraq.

Two days, later allied troops invaded Iraq. It was and remains widely regarded as the start of

the Iraq War. Only a very few people knew that was not the truth. The war had begun ten months earlier on 20 May 2002 when British and American aircraft began bombing the 391 “carefully selected” targets assigned to Operation Southern Force, the illegal joint British and American bombing campaign that Chilcot completely missed.

Intelligence beast reporter Michael Smith broke the story of the secret “Downing Street Memos” in 2005. This article was originally published on Michael Smith’s blog.

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