



Britain Must Heed Chilcot's Lessons for Remote Warfare

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The Chilcot Report may have been written with a focus on the conventional methods of war used in Iraq; however, the government must heed its warnings as the UK becomes ever more reliant on covert, remote means of warfare.

The Chilcot Report marked a landmark moment in addressing the problems with UK military strategy during the Iraq War. Its 2.6 million words document a litany of errors from inception to withdrawal. Lord Chilcot's speech on the report paints a picture of a government who, among other things, avoided scrutiny from the public and parliament and failed to fully consider the consequences of its military actions 'despite explicit warnings'.

Unfortunately, reporting on a war which began over a decade ago has meant that the report highlights problems with a war strategy that the [government has already improved](#) and says very little on remote military operations – which are now the mammoth share of UK military operations. Remote warfare relies predominantly on the use of special forces and drones in countries the UK is not official at war with. These operations risk falling into the same traps as those the Chilcot Report describes but the government does not seem to be applying its lessons to this area of their military strategy.

Remote warfare continues to avoid public and parliamentary scrutiny. For example, in [2011 British special forces were discovered by Al Jazeera in Libya](#); however, when asked about the mission the, then-Secretary of State Liam Fox responded that he had 'no intention of commenting further on Special Forces'. Similarly, in February 2016, when Defence Secretary Michael Fallon was asked if he would guarantee MPs a debate in advance of any decision to

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deploy UK armed drones outside Syria and Iraq he replied 'no'. These operations are not even accountable to the same laws of engagement. For example, [Vice News](#) noted that, in Yemen, criticisms of the US's airstrikes meant that British personnel could no longer collaborate with the US on intelligence sharing – however, it added 'these rules did not apply to' the covert forces – such as the Secret Intelligence Service.

The government must remember the lessons of Chilcot to ensure it does not address its past mistakes in one area of its military only to make them again in another. First, the government must improve scrutiny of remote warfare, to improve its legitimacy and effectiveness. Parliament and the public remain in the dark about how these methods operate and are deployed. As [Remote Control](#) argues, 'this feeds an assumption that they are specifically used for illegal and otherwise illegitimate operations'.

Moreover, lack of scrutiny of covert missions may lead to the government undertaking these operations because they are easy rather than because they are the best course of action. For example, [in a document leaked in 2013](#), the UK Ministry of Defence argued that one way to continue conducting military operations despite the risk-averse nature of the British public was 'investing in greater numbers of SF [Special Forces]'.

Great scrutiny is not unachievable and is evident among the UK's allies. [Remote Control's](#) recent briefing documents a number of instances where the US, Canada and Australia announced declassified aspects of their special forces' operations. While none of these countries discuss many of the details they, at least, provide space to defend and justify their decisions.

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Second, there must be an assessment of the consequences of remote warfare. There is often an assumption that these operations are risk free; however, many have challenged this. For example, [Wali Asam found](#) that, rather than diminishing the number of terrorists, drone strikes were causing terrorist networks to leave the rural areas of Pakistan and spread out into a number of more populated areas, leading to increased terrorism and violence in these areas. The government must fully consider the consequences of remote warfare and be certain it is the right course of action.

Lord Chilcot noted in his speech: 'Above all, the lesson is that all aspects of any intervention need to be calculated, debated and challenged with the utmost rigour'. The government must ensure it does so with remote warfare.

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About the Author

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