

## UK Iraq Inquiry: Not a court, but lessons to be learnt

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***Editor's note:*** *The Daily Star* publishes excerpts from the opening statement of the UK Iraq Inquiry, which began operating on November 24, 2009. Sir John Chilcot chairs the UK Iraq Inquiry and made the remarks found below. The full public proceedings of the Inquiry can be found on [www.iraqinquiry.org.uk](http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk).

Welcome to the Iraq Inquiry's first day of public hearings ... I am joined by my colleagues Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman, Professor Sir Martin Gilbert, Sir Roderic Lyne and Baroness Usha Prashar. Together we form the Iraq Inquiry Committee. Next to me is Margaret Aldred who is the Secretary to the Inquiry. The Iraq Inquiry was set up to identify the lessons that should be learned from the UK's involvement in Iraq to help future governments who may face similar situations.

To do this, we need to establish what happened. We are piecing this together from the evidence we are collecting from documents or from those who have first hand experience. We will then need to evaluate what went well and what didn't – and, crucially, why ...

Over the past months we have requested and received mountains of written material from government departments involved in Iraq from 2001-09. We have spent many hours combing through these official records – and will continue to do this in the months ahead. We are confident that we will have access to all the material that we need.

But we don't want to, and are not, just hearing from the "official" representatives. We value hearing a broad spectrum of views from a wide range of people and organizations ...

The next phase begins today. We have called as witnesses those with first-hand experience of the development and implementation of UK government policy in Iraq. Our first round of public hearings begins today and runs until early February 2010. We will then take a break from public hearings, returning to our analysis of written material. We will hold some private hearings: to take evidence on matters which if disclosed in public would cause harm to the public interest, or where there are other genuine reasons why a witness would have difficulty being frank in public. The circumstances in which we will hold private hearings are set out in the Protocols published on the Inquiry website.

There will be a further round of public hearings in the middle of 2010. We expect to invite back some previous witnesses and, where relevant, call some new ones. What I

would like to stress now is that people should not jump to conclusions if they do not hear everything they expect in the first round of hearings: there will be more to follow.

Once we have collected all the evidence we need, we will be in a position to draw conclusions and make recommendations. We plan to report by the end of 2010 ...

That is for next year. For now it might be useful to set out today what we aim to cover in the initial phase of public hearings, and how we plan to conduct our business; we want to establish a clear understanding of the various core elements of the UK's involvement in Iraq, and how these developed over time. We will start by hearing from the senior officials and military officers who had a key role in developing advice for ministers and/or implementing government policy. We want them to take us through the main decisions and tasks. That will give us a clear understanding of the various strands of British policy development and implementation since 2001. We will learn the reasons why particular policies or courses of action were adopted, and what consideration was given to alternative approaches.

Once we have heard that initial evidence, we will begin to take evidence from ministers and other officials about issues which run throughout the period we have been asked to consider. In some cases, we will be able – on the basis of the evidence we have heard from officials earlier in the session – to get into considerable detail. In other cases, we may need to return to a number of the issues at a later stage. It will be during those hearings in the New Year – and not before – that we will be hearing about the legal basis for military action.

In all our questioning we will be drawing on the vast number of documents that we have already read. This has given us a good sense of the main events of the period; the issues and pre-occupations. Oral evidence will build on our previous knowledge. It will help develop our lines of inquiry – these, I must stress, are still developing. We remain, as we have been from the outset, open minded. What we are committed to, and what the British general public can expect from us, is a guarantee to be thorough, impartial, objective and fair.

Perhaps this is an appropriate moment to set out our expectations of how these proceedings will run.

Iraq Inquiry Committee members will ask the questions. Witnesses will respond for themselves. We expect them always to give evidence that is truthful, fair and accurate. We do not intend to ask questions today that will involve evidence that might harm national security or other important public interests as described in the Protocols we have published. In the extremely unlikely event that evidence moved toward such matters sensitive to national security, I would intervene to halt the proceedings.

As I have said before, we are not a court or an inquest or a statutory inquiry; and our processes will reflect that difference. No one is on trial. We cannot determine guilt or innocence. Only a court can do that. But I make a commitment here that once we get to our final report, we will not shy away from making criticisms where they are warranted ...