

Research Article

British Public Opinion after a Decade of War: Attitudes to Iraq and Afghanistan

Rachael Gribble and Simon Wessley

King's Centre for Military Health Research (KCMHR), King's College London

Susan Klein and David A. Alexander

Aberdeen Centre for Trauma Research, Robert Gordon University

Christopher Dandeker and Nicola T. Fear

KCMHR, King's College London

Using data from the 2011 British Social Attitudes survey ($n = 3,311$), this article compares British public opinion of the purposes and successes of the Iraq and Afghanistan missions. Public acceptance of military deaths/injuries, the accuracy of public estimates of military fatalities and how these differ according to opinions of the missions are determined. It is found that the British public is doubtful of the missions' achievements and cynical about their purposes. Perceptions of the campaigns were associated with the accuracy of estimations of UK military fatalities, and the acceptability of military deaths/injuries. Implications for social and political theory and British foreign policy are discussed.

Keywords: Afghanistan; Iraq; public opinion; UK military; military fatalities

Introduction

The British public's support for military action and attitudes towards the Iraq and Afghanistan missions have been discussed widely within media, political, social and military circles since the first possibility of British involvement in military action in Afghanistan emerged over a decade ago (Hansard, 18 March 2003; Travis, 2001; De Waal, 2013). These debates included the wider public as well, with large-scale protests at the commencement of both the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns demonstrating widespread opposition (BBC News, 2001, 2003b; Syalm, Alderson and Milner, 2003).

Public support of government-led military action plays an important role in defence and foreign policy by establishing the political legitimacy of missions (Canan-Sokullu, 2012); maintaining military effectiveness (Szayna et al., 2007); sustaining the morale of deployed troops (Dixon, 2000); and justifying the budgets required to resource the military (Edmunds, 2012). Yet, robust evidence of what the British public thinks of the missions, and how opinion may differ between them, is lacking despite the length of the United Kingdom's involvement in both the Iraq and Afghanistan missions. Most data on British public opinion in this area have been collected via opinion polls (Angus Reid Global Monitor, 2008; ICM Research, 2008; Ipsos Mori, 2001 and 2007), providing relatively quick and timely evidence on public

perceptions. However, there are potential issues regarding the representativeness of samples in relation to some social groups, such as those without Internet or landline access (Bethlehem, 2010; Blumberg and Luke, 2009; Duffy and Smith, 2005). Independent and representative UK surveys about public attitudes towards these missions are infrequent compared to the number of US studies (Clements, 2011; Gribble et al., 2012; Scotto et al., 2011). While some have contrasted public attitudes to the Iraq and Afghanistan missions (Clements, 2011; Scotto et al., 2011), these have not always included formal statistical comparisons of how public opinion may differ between the two campaigns.

Research into public opinion of the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns is also lacking in relation to the British public's estimation and tolerance of military casualties. American studies have drawn on theories suggesting that public opinion about the success, moral justifications and objectives of a military campaign is related to public acceptability of military deaths (Eichenberg, 2005; Gelpi, Feaver and Reifler, 2005–2006). Other theories suggest that the absolute numbers of deaths is largely irrelevant, with accurate public estimates of military fatalities associated with attitudes towards missions (Myers and Hayes, 2010). Public aversion to, and tolerance of, military casualties is therefore dependent on the context of the mission in which they occur. Whether these same associations exist in terms of British public estimations, or how influential the perceived success, objectives or actual number of deaths are, is not clear.

This article contributes to the understanding of perceptions of the Iraq and Afghanistan missions among the British public using high-quality empirical evidence. Data from the 2011 British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey (NatCen Social Research, 2012) are used to compare and contrast public attitudes towards the two missions regarding success and purpose. Theories of casualty estimation will be explored in the UK context by determining how the accuracy of public assessments and acceptability of military deaths are related to public perceptions of the two missions.

Methods and sample

This article draws on research that measured British public opinion of the military missions in Iraq and Afghanistan using data from the 2011 BSA survey (NatCen Social Research, 2012). The BSA uses a multi-stage design to select a representative sample of adults aged 18 years and over living in England, Scotland and Wales. For the 2011 questionnaire, the King's Centre for Military Health Research (KCMHR), in conjunction with colleagues at the Aberdeen Centre for Trauma Research (ACTR, Robert Gordon University) and NatCen Social Research, developed a module on British public attitudes towards the UK armed forces and the missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Data were collected from June to September 2011 by fieldworkers via face-to-face computer-assisted interviews. Overall, a total of 3,311 British adults took part, representing a response rate of 54 per cent.¹ During the interviews, respondents were randomly allocated by computer to answer identical questions relating to either the Iraq ($n = 1,673$) or Afghanistan ($n = 1,638$) missions. The demographic characteristics were similar for both groups, although there were slightly more respondents aged 25–34 years in the Afghanistan group compared to the Iraq group ($p = 0.018$).

Outcome measures

Public perceptions of the Iraq and Afghanistan missions were determined using respondents' opinions of the purposes of the campaigns ('What do you think were/are the main purposes

of having the UK armed forces deployed to Iraq in 2003/Afghanistan?) from a list of pre-selected and piloted responses. Approval ('The UK was right to go to Iraq/Afghanistan') and perceived success ('The mission of the UK armed forces in Iraq achieved success/Afghanistan is achieving success') of the missions was measured, as was participation in activities to support or oppose the campaigns ('Did you ever/Have you taken part in any activities to support or oppose the mission in Iraq/Afghanistan?') and support for various withdrawal options. The accuracy of public estimation of military casualties during these missions ('How many UK military personnel do you think have died since 2003 in Iraq/since 2001 in Afghanistan?') and the acceptability of such fatalities or injuries ('Regrettable although death and injury to armed forces personnel are, they are acceptable when compared with the importance of the mission that is being achieved?') was determined. The association with perceptions of the missions was examined.

Analysis

Data were analysed using weighted survey commands to take account of non-response and sampling strategies within the BSA. Predictors of non-response largely concerned the ability to contact potential respondents (NatCen Social Research, 2012). Unless otherwise stated, all analyses were conducted using STATA[®] version 11.2. Statistical significance was defined as $p < 0.05$. Reported percentages and odds ratios are weighted, while cell counts remain unweighted.

Multi-nominal regression was used to account for multiple options in answers regarding the perceived success of the missions, as well as activities to support or oppose them. Due to a small number of responses in some of the categories, 'Agree strongly' and 'Agree' were combined, as were 'Disagree strongly' and 'Disagree', and compared to the reference category 'Neither agree nor disagree'. 'Don't know' and 'Refusal' were excluded from analysis, but comprised less than 5 per cent of overall responses for each question. Multi-nominal odds ratios were adjusted for age, gender, education and military connections (friends, family, neighbour or colleague currently or previously serving as member of the UK armed forces). Prior analyses found that political affiliation strongly correlated with education and was not a predictor of differences in attitudes to the Iraq and Afghanistan missions when both variables were included in regression models. Therefore, analyses did not control for this variable. Where responses were combined from the two mission groups, further adjustment was made for the campaign participants to which were randomly allocated. Public support for various withdrawal strategies from Afghanistan were measured using weighted percentages and unweighted counts.

The multi-response functions of SPSS[®] version 15.0 were used to analyse public perceptions of the purposes of the missions as respondents were able to give up to two answers to this question. Percentages are based on the number of responses per column. Differences in the perceived objectives of British involvement were examined according to age, gender and education and differences tested using the multi-response comparison of column proportions for all potential responses. Only the two most commonly endorsed purposes and differences deemed to be statistically significant at $p < 0.05$ are reported.

To analyse public estimates of the number of UK armed forces deaths during the missions, official Ministry of Defence military personnel fatality figures (Ministry of Defence, 2009, 2012) at the time of the survey were used to calculate three categories; 'Accurate', 'Under-estimated' and 'Over-estimated'. Accurate responses were considered to be those within a range of ± 50 deaths of the official estimate, rounded to the nearest hundred: for Iraq, this was

200 deaths (150–250) and 400 deaths (350–450) for Afghanistan. To test the possibility that, given the proximity of the two missions, the public may believe the number of military deaths to be similar for both campaigns, sensitivity analyses were performed using an accurate range of 300 (250–350). The acceptability of military deaths and injuries compared to the importance of the mission achieved was measured using weighted percentages and unweighted counts. Associations between estimations of military fatalities and acceptability of deaths or injuries and public approval and perceived success of the missions were examined using Pearson's Chi² tests.

Results

Nearly six out of ten disagreed with British involvement in the Iraq mission compared to nearly five out of ten for Afghanistan (see Gribble et al. (2012) for further details). Support for UK military involvement was higher among men, people with educational qualifications and younger age groups compared to women, those with no qualifications and older people. Less than a third saw either mission as achieving success (Table 1). The Afghanistan group was significantly more likely to believe the mission was successful than those in the Iraq group ($p = 0.023$). Despite opposition to the missions and a perceived lack of success, less than 5 per cent of respondents reported taking part in activities to oppose the campaigns (Table 1). Respondents in the Afghanistan group were less likely to participate in actions disputing this campaign ($p \leq 0.001$) and more likely to be involved in those supporting the mission ($p = 0.017$).

Ensuring Western oil supplies (47 per cent) and preventing the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) (32 per cent) were considered to be the major reasons for the deployment

Table 1: The British public's beliefs about the missions in Iraq and Afghanistan

Public support	Iraq % (N = 1,673)*	Afghanistan % (N = 1,638)*	Unadj. OR (95% CI) [†]	Adj. OR (95% CI) [‡]
Mission achieved/is achieving success				
Agree	27 (427)	30 (454)	1.20 (0.98–1.47)	1.27 (1.04–1.57)
Neither agree/disagree	34 (543)	31 (513)	1.0	1.0
Disagree	39 (657)	39 (626)	1.10 (0.91–1.31)	1.14 (0.95–1.38)
Taken part in activities to ... the mission				
Support	4 (59)	6 (59)	1.64 (1.13–2.38)	1.60 (1.09–2.36)
Not taken part in any	92 (1,535)	92 (1,501)	1.0	1.0
Oppose	5 (69)	2 (33)	0.39 (0.25–0.63)	0.39 (0.25–0.61)

* Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding. Don't Know, Refusal not included ($n = 10-49$). Denominators may vary as respondents did not complete all relevant questions.

[†] Iraq/Neither/Not taken part' baseline.

[‡] Adjusted for gender, age, education, military connection.

Table 2: The British public's perception of the purposes of the Iraq (I) and Afghanistan (A) missions

Perceived purpose	Iraq % (N)*	Afghanistan % (N)*
To ensure Western oil supplies (I)/gain access to oil and mineral resources (A)	47 (770)	24 (377)
To prevent Iraq from acquiring WMD	32 (546)	–
To protect the UK from the risk of Saddam Hussein's support of terrorism (I)/the risk of terrorism (A)	27 (466)	53 (863)
To help the US and our NATO allies	21 (327)	23 (362)
To make Iraq/Afghanistan a stable country	17 (281)	50 (797)
To make the Middle East a more stable region	14 (228)	–
To prevent Iraq from threatening its neighbours	9 (162)	–
To make Iraq/Afghanistan a successful democracy	7 (98)	16 (269)
To make Iraq/Afghanistan an economic success	2 (27)	3 (57)
To help the war on drugs	–	8 (131)

* Sum > N/100 per cent as totals and percentages calculated from responses to two questions. Unsolicited responses, Other, Don't Know, Refusal, non-response at second purpose question not included (Iraq n = 441, Afghanistan n = 420).

of the UK armed forces to Iraq (Table 2). Protecting the UK from the risk of terrorism (53 per cent) and achieving stability (50 per cent) were believed to be the main purposes for UK military involvement in Afghanistan.

Perceptions of the purposes of the mission were related to support of the missions and beliefs about their success (see Table A1). Those endorsing ensuring Western oil supplies as the objective of the UK mission in Iraq, when compared to those endorsing prevention of WMD, were significantly more likely to disagree with the campaign (69 per cent versus 51 per cent, Pearson's $\chi^2 = 103.13$, $df = 4$, $p < 0.001$) and less likely to perceive it as successful (20 per cent versus 34 per cent, Pearson's $\chi^2 = 106.41$, $df = 4$, $p < 0.001$). Those who believed that the purpose of the campaign in Afghanistan was to make the country stable, when compared to those who thought the mission was for anti-terror purposes, were more likely to agree with the mission (39 per cent versus 34 per cent, Pearson's $\chi^2 = 35.17$, $df = 4$, $p < 0.001$) and more likely to hold a positive view regarding its success (37 per cent versus 33 per cent, Pearson's $\chi^2 = 20.66$, $df = 4$, $p < 0.001$).

The most popular options for ending the UK's involvement in the Afghanistan campaign were for withdrawal either 'as soon as possible, without conditions' or 'as soon as the Afghan government can protect its territory and prevent terrorism within its borders' (Table 3).

Less than a quarter of the public accurately estimated the number of UK military fatalities (Table 4). The Afghanistan group was more likely to under-estimate the number of military deaths compared to the Iraq group ($p \leq 0.001$). More than 40 per cent of the public did not feel military deaths or injuries were acceptable compared to the importance of the mission achieved. There was no difference in acceptability according to mission.

Table 3: Public support for options for withdrawal from Afghanistan

Options for withdrawal from Afghanistan	% (n)
As soon as possible, without conditions	35 (596)
As soon as the government in Afghanistan can protect its territory and prevent it from being used as a base for terrorism	34 (545)
As soon as the government in Afghanistan can protect its territory	19 (286)
As soon as Afghanistan has become a successful democracy/AND has a successful economy	5 (81)
At a fixed future date, without conditions	4 (72)
Other	0.5 (8)
Don't know	2 (46)

* Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding. Refusal excluded (N = 4).

Table 4: The British public's perception of UK military fatalities

	Iraq % (N = 1,673)*	Afghanistan % (N = 1,638)*	Unadj. OR (95% CI) [†]	Adj. OR (95% CI) [‡]
Estimate of UK military fatalities				
Under-estimated	11 (130)	43 (600)	5.66 (4.28–7.49)	5.58 (4.19–7.45)
Accurate	24 (300)	17 (252)	1.0	1.0
Over-estimated	66 (853)	39 (520)	0.82 (0.66–1.02)	0.81 (0.64–1.02)
Acceptability of deaths/injuries compared to importance of mission				
Agree	37 (610)	38 (625)	0.97 (0.78–1.21)	1.04 (0.83–1.31)
Neither	18 (294)	20 (301)	1.0	1.0
Disagree	45 (739)	42 (686)	0.87 (0.70–1.08)	0.91 (0.73–1.15)

* Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding. Don't Know, Refusal not included (n = 656). Denominators may vary as respondents did not complete all relevant questions.

[†] 'Iraq/Accurate' baseline.

[‡] Adjusted for gender, age, education, military connection.

Estimations of military fatalities were associated with opinions of the campaigns (Table 5). A greater proportion of participants who disagreed with UK involvement in Iraq or Afghanistan over-estimated the number of military fatalities ($p < 0.001$). There were no significant differences in estimation according to beliefs about the success of the mission (see Table A2).

Accurate estimation of military deaths was associated with perceptions of the objectives of the missions. Accurate estimates of military casualties was significantly higher among people who believed the mission in Iraq was to ensure oil supplies for the West (24 per cent versus 18 per cent, Pearson's $\chi^2 = 15.67$, $df = 4$, $p < 0.01$) than those who believed the mission was to prevent acquisition of WMD, although for some categories n was small, and among those who believed the purpose of Afghanistan was to prevent terrorism (19 per cent versus 14 per cent,

Table 5: The British public's estimates of UK military fatalities and support for the missions

	The UK was right to go to Iraq/ Afghanistan % (N) [†]			X2	(df)
	Agree (N = 712)	Neither (N = 465)	Disagree (N = 1,445)		
Estimate of UK casualties					
Under-estimated	31 (219)	19 (135)	49 (365)		
Accurate	33 (167)	14 (82)	53 (298)		
Over-estimated	25 (326)	18 (248)	57 (782)	4.68***	4
Acceptability of deaths/injuries if mission important					
Agree	43 (505)	19 (233)	38 (471)		
Neither	24 (136)	33 (186)	43 (256)		
Disagree	15 (196)	12 (170)	73 (1,038)	88.82***	4
UK armed forces mission in Iraq/ Afghanistan achieved success % (N) [†]					
	Agree (N = 881)	Neither (N = 1,056)	Disagree (N = 1,283)		
Acceptability of deaths/injuries if mission successful					
Agree	41 (484)	34 (418)	25 (311)		
Neither	30 (174)	45 (256)	25 (152)		
Disagree	16 (213)	26 (369)	58 (812)	78.86***	4

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

[†] Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding. Don't Know, Refusal not included ($n = 689$). Denominators may vary as respondents did not complete all relevant questions. Data combined from Iraq and Afghanistan groups.

Pearson's $\chi^2 = 23.72$, $df = 4$, $p < 0.001$) than those who thought the mission was to stabilise the country (see Table A3).

The acceptability of death or injury during these missions differed according to respondent's attitudes towards the missions (Table 5). Respondents who disagreed with UK involvement in Iraq or Afghanistan or who thought the missions were unsuccessful were significantly more likely to disagree with the acceptability of military deaths or injuries in successful missions (both $p < 0.001$).

Perceptions differed by sociodemographics. Women were significantly less likely to agree or disagree with the success of the mission ($p < 0.01$) compared to men, while people aged 44 years and younger were significantly less likely to disagree with the success of the missions ($p < 0.05$) compared to those aged 65 years and over (see Table A4). Due to small numbers, we were not able to examine participation in activities to support or oppose the missions by sociodemographics.

Endorsement of the two most commonly perceived objectives of the missions differed by sociodemographics (Figure 1) – all are statistically significant at $p < 0.05$. The perception that ensuring Western oil supplies was the main reason for UK involvement in Iraq was significantly higher among men, those aged 45–54 years and those with the highest level of education compared to women, the youngest age group (18–24 years) and those with no or low education, respectively. Endorsement of prevention of the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction was significantly higher among women and those aged 18–24 years compared to men and the two oldest age groups (55–64 and 65+ years). Belief that the main objective of the mission in Afghanistan was to stabilise the country was significantly higher among people aged 18–24 and 35–44 years than other age groups and among those with any form of educational qualification compared to those with none. People with an O-level education or equivalent were significantly more likely to believe Afghanistan was to prevent terrorism than other educational groups.

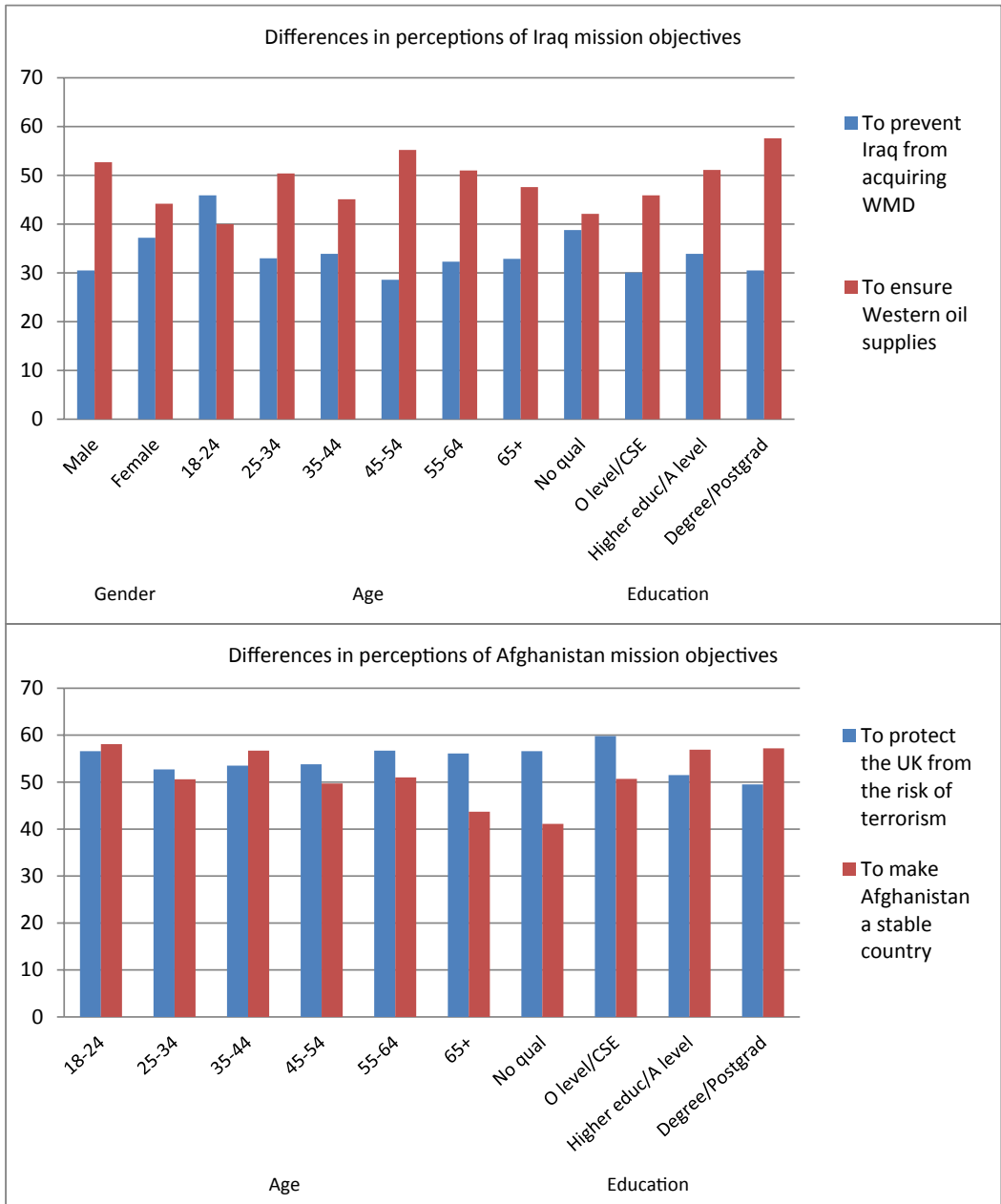
Women ($p < 0.001$), people over 18–34 years ($p < 0.01$) and those with university education ($p < 0.005$) were significantly more likely to over-estimate military fatalities than men, people aged 65 years and over and those with lower educational qualifications (see Table A5).

Discussion

British public opinions of the Iraq and Afghanistan missions are largely negative and perceptions of the objectives of missions indicate that public understanding of the reasons behind the campaigns broadly reflects those portrayed by the government and media. Attitudes to the missions differed, with the campaign in Afghanistan tending to be viewed more positively and there was evident cynicism about the objectives of the Iraq campaign. Perceptions of the missions were associated with both the accuracy of estimations of UK military fatalities and the acceptability of such deaths or injuries.

Public approval of the missions has been examined elsewhere (Gribble et al., 2012) and is therefore only briefly summarised here. Most of the public did not feel the campaigns had achieved success and support for UK involvement in either mission was low, as reported elsewhere (Gribble et al., 2012; Clements, 2011; Scotto et al., 2011; Springford, 2003). Only a very small minority of the public reported taking part in activities supporting or opposing the missions. However, this question gave no specific examples of activities pertaining to either

Figure 1: Most commonly perceived purposes of Iraq and Afghanistan by sociodemographics



support or opposition. Therefore, responses may reflect an inability by participants to recall their involvement in any such actions, rather than an accurate indication of contributions to either support or opposition activities. Recognition of activities supporting the missions may be difficult for members of the public to recollect, especially as it is likely that such activities would have been aimed at supporting military personnel taking part in the missions (e.g. collecting for armed forces charities), rather than involvement in tasks directly in support of the campaigns. Sociodemographics are also important. While large-scale public protests occurred during the initial stages of both missions, the low numbers who reported taking part in opposition activities may reflect the specific demographics of those taking part in public protests. Protestors were more likely to be university educated, politically aligned to the left, highly interested in politics and active members of organisations (e.g. environmental, union, humanitarian, church groups or other) (Walgrave and Verhulst, 2009). With the BSA sample aiming to be representative of the British public as a whole, the opinions of this particular section of society are necessarily reflected alongside those of other sociodemographic groups. As result, participation in opposition activities overall may seem lower than might be expected if it had been possible to examine involvement by sociodemographics.

Our findings indicate differences in how the British public perceives the two campaigns, with a less negative perception of Afghanistan than Iraq in terms of the success of the mission and increased participation in activities supporting this campaign, although the numbers are small. This divergence in opinion between Iraq and Afghanistan is evident in previous international research (Burris, 2008; Midford, 2006; Pew Research Center, 2011) and is largely related to the longstanding differences in the individual justifications, courses and circumstances of the two campaigns (Jacobsen, 2010). Public support for the Afghanistan mission has decreased substantially from its initial heights immediately prior to the mission (Ipsos Mori, 2001), with polls, in combination with our previous work, suggesting opposition may have plateaued at around 57 per cent since 2010 (Angus Reid Public Opinion, 2010). Given our findings, it is plausible to suggest that the perceived lack of success of the Afghanistan mission, combined with the changing objectives and public fatigue from the mission's duration and costs, may be responsible for this decrease in support (Gartner, 2008; Miller, 2010). There may also be a 'contagion effect' from increasing negative views of the Iraq mission on support for Afghanistan (Miller, 2010), especially as there appears to be some cross-over regarding perceptions of these missions' objectives.

Public opinion of the Iraq campaign indicates evident cynicism about the proposed reasons for UK involvement. The mostly commonly cited reason for the purpose of this mission (access to oil supplies) did not align with the official aims of the Iraq campaign (preventing the acquisition of WMD, democratisation and preventing terrorism) (BBC News, 2003a). This may stem from the disclosure of what became known as the 'dodgy dossier' that formed the basis of claims about Saddam Hussein's possession of WMD and was used by then Prime Minister Tony Blair to increase support for the mission (Humphreys, 2005). The realisation of the limitations of the dossier's claims led to a general distrust of the motives of the government of the time (Stanyer, 2004) and the emergence of a 'war-for-oil' narrative which has gained traction in certain sources of mainstream media (Greenwald, 2013; Juhasz, 2013). Examining perceived objectives of the missions by sociodemographics suggests that this narrative is commonly endorsed by men and those with university-level education, possibly as a result of their increased attention and engagement with current affairs (Holsti, 2004; Verba, Burns and Lehman Schlozman, 1997).

Public interpretations of the purposes of the Afghanistan mission, on the other hand, reflect the official objectives of this campaign (prevent terrorism and create stability) as communicated by the government and media during the lead-up to UK involvement (Oakes and Youngs, 2001). This suggests that these messages were widely disseminated and understood. However, growing doubts about the motives for UK involvement in Iraq appear to have influenced opinions about Afghanistan, with almost a quarter of responses considering gaining access to oil and mineral resources to be a reason for the mission despite these factors never being mentioned in any official communications about the campaign.

Public approval and opinions regarding the missions' success were clearly associated with beliefs about their primary objectives. Respondents who were cynical about the Iraq mission were less favourable about the mission and its successes. This view might be expected given their suspicion about the mission's true purposes. The perceived objectives of the Afghanistan mission also appear to influence public support, which was lower when a somewhat vague aim of preventing terrorism was endorsed despite the potential threat to the UK, possibly indicating public fatigue with or scepticism about the so-called 'War on Terror'. When the objectives of the mission were deemed to have a humanitarian focus in stabilising the country, support was higher, reflecting the greater public endorsement of this type of mission compared to support for campaigns with alternative aims (Eichenberg, 2005). A similar relationship between British approval of military missions and the moral justifications of the campaign has been found in previous research on influences on British approval of military missions (Reifler et al., 2013). As this was a one-off and cross-sectional study, and due to the lengthy duration of the missions, we are unable to determine the direction of this relationship in influencing British public opinion: that is to say, do perceptions of the campaigns' objectives influence public attitudes towards the missions or do perceptions of poor success over time alter what people believe to be the reasons for initial UK involvement?

Given that a large proportion of the public sees the Afghanistan mission as unsuccessful and disagrees with UK involvement, it is not surprising that one of the most commonly preferred withdrawal options was for the immediate recall of UK troops. Yet despite this, and even with the elements of cynicism regarding its objectives, the public appear to understand what may be at stake in terms of stability both within Afghanistan, as well as the wider region, with a similar proportion supporting withdrawal only once the Afghan government can protect itself and prevent terrorism. Whether this arises from self-preservation and a desire to protect the UK or an altruistic view of foreign policy is not clear. It does suggest a more nuanced understanding of the aims and consequences of the Afghanistan mission than might have been previously thought, especially given low overall public support. Less than 5 per cent of the public endorsed the current Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government's strategy of withdrawing at a future fixed date without conditions which may have implications for public, as well as political, support of the governments' present plans. While this figure is low, it is important to note that the survey was conducted at a time when this was not the primary strategy for Afghanistan and before the 2014 timeline for withdrawal was agreed. It is possible that this strategy may be much more popular now than when the survey was conducted, although perhaps associated with doubts about what has been achieved in Afghanistan and whether it has been worth the costs. These questions are likely to continue as elites and the general public make retrospective judgements on the wars of 9/11 following the withdrawal of UK and other allied forces from Afghanistan.

Public estimation and tolerance of military casualties in the UK

The majority of the public either under- or over-estimated the number of UK military deaths, with accurate estimation poorer than comparable American research on Iraq (Berinsky, 2007). With increased public attention to media coverage of such casualties known to be a major predictor of the accurate estimation of military deaths or injuries (Bennett and Flickinger, 2009), the poor accuracy of estimates might indicate that the British public's attention towards, and therefore understanding of, events during the missions may be low, although a lack of general public interest may also explain the inaccuracy of overall estimates.

As previously outlined, public tolerance of military casualties has previously been associated with public opinions of the justifications, perceived success and objectives of a military campaign (Eichenberg, 2005; Gelpi, Feaver and Reifler, 2005–2006). Public attitudes to the missions have been suggested as playing a larger role in public estimations of military fatalities than the actual number of deaths (Myers and Hayes, 2010). Our findings show that British public acceptance of military deaths or injuries was associated with both success and approval of missions but that estimation of military fatalities was related only to campaign approval. This provides some evidence in support of Myers and Hayes' perceived casualty theory within a UK context (Myers and Hayes, 2010). Research has also suggested that elite discourse, rather than casualties sustained during this mission, play a bigger role in approval of Afghanistan (Kriner and Wilson, 2010). Unfortunately, this was something that was not able to be tested in this study.

The difference in estimations of the number of military deaths between the campaigns is surprising. Certainly, it cannot be blamed on a lack of information; both the Iraq and Afghanistan missions were similar in terms of the campaign length, as well as public interest, and public access to information was encouraged and facilitated by embedding journalists into military units within the constraints of operational security. One possible explanation is that the differences in the accuracy of public estimation of military fatalities during the missions may be a consequence of the overlap in operations in these two theatres. As a result of the missions occurring simultaneously for at least some of their duration, the public may have conflated the events of the missions, resulting in perceptions of the number of fatalities being roughly equal between the two. If this 'average' number of fatalities is higher than the true value for the Iraq campaign but lower than that of Afghanistan, it will appear that the former is more likely to be over-estimated and the latter under-estimated. This was tested using sensitivity analyses. Results indicated that the differences in estimation between the missions remained; the Afghanistan group was more accurate in their estimations and less likely to either under- or over-estimate the number of fatalities ($p < 0.05$) (see Table A6).

So where might this difference stem from? Since the Afghanistan mission is viewed significantly more positively in comparison to Iraq, this might explain the improved accuracy in the former group if missions with greater public support also have greater public understanding and attention. We also examined estimation of military deaths according to perceptions of the objectives of the missions. Those who were the most cynical about the purposes of the missions, endorsing war-for-oil (Iraq) or terrorism (Afghanistan) narratives, were the most able to accurately estimate the number of UK military fatalities, although this was proportionally still low. Considering the increased interest that such people are likely to have in the costs of these campaigns, including human fatalities, this finding is perhaps less surprising, especially when we are reminded that those most likely to endorse the war-for-oil narrative

for the Iraq mission are men and those with higher education are the same groups who are more likely to be engaged with current affairs media.

As with our prior research, attitudes towards the missions differed according to sociodemographics. Previous research from both the US and UK indicates that men, older people and those with lower levels of education are more supportive of military conflicts than women, younger people and those with higher education (Burris, 2008; Caforio, 2007; Clements, 2011; Eichenberg, 2005; Gonzalez, 1996; Holsti, 2004; Leal, 2005; Rohall, Ender and Matthews, 2006; Schoen, 2007; Vennesson, 2003). Both our prior research and the findings from this article reflect similar patterns, with higher disapproval of the missions among women and those with higher levels of education; however, the oldest age group, people aged 65 years and over, were the most critical of the missions (Gribble et al., 2012). Similarly, our findings indicate similar patterns in the perceptions of success among women, although not for other potential predictors of opinion. Disapproval may be related to perceptions of the missions' objectives – for example, given that women were more likely to perceive the objectives of the Iraq mission to be prevention of WMD, it is possible that the disclosure of the dodgy dossier resulted in greater disapproval of a mission that they perceive as having little legitimacy.

Attitudes to the missions also seem to play a role in the accuracy of estimates of military casualties. Men and those with higher educational qualifications report greater engagement with current affairs, and access to information on military fatalities, than other groups (Bennett and Flickinger, 2009; Holsti, 2004; Verba, Burns and Lehman Schlozman, 1997). It is perhaps not unexpected then for women to be more likely to over-estimate the number of military casualties compared to men. However, the same was not seen for those with higher educational attainment. This group was more likely to over-estimate the number of military deaths despite its greater interest in current affairs. Younger people were also more likely to over-estimate military casualties. Men tend to have more favourable attitudes towards military conflict and spending than women (Caforio, 2007; Clements, 2011; Eichenberg, 2003; Rohall, Ender and Matthews, 2006; Schoen, 2007), with the possibility that they underestimate any undesirable costs involved in military action. Those with higher educational attainment and younger people, on the other hand, tend to be more critical of the use of military force compared to those with low educational qualifications and older people (Burris, 2008; Gonzalez, 1996; Holsti, 2004; Leal, 2005; Vennesson, 2003), potentially over-estimating the costs of military action because of their deep-seated opposition to it. These findings, combined with the association between estimation of military fatalities and approval of the missions, suggest that approval of military campaigns may be an influential predictor of accuracy of military fatalities among the British public.

Implications and areas for future research

Ten years on, it appears that the British public has doubts about the objectives and success of the lengthy and often controversial Iraq and Afghanistan missions. While Afghanistan is likely to be a less contentious political issue following the end of the UK's combat mission in 2014 (Defence Committee, 2013), a complex picture of British public opinion of how the UK armed forces are deployed in military action post-9/11 emerges; support for the missions is low, their perceived success is poor and there is evidence of cynicism regarding the motives in Iraq stemming from the 'dodgy dossier' and significant differences in perceptions among sociodemographic groups. Confusion and doubts over the truthfulness of government sources

in relation to the purposes of military action may have potential implications for the viability of UK involvement in future missions, including NATO or UN campaigns if these uncertainties and suspicions become commonplace. Future missions may require a stronger case for involvement in order to gain public approval, particularly among those groups most likely to be sceptical about Iraq and Afghanistan, with reduced support for missions whose reasons seem irrelevant or ambiguous, particularly if there is a perception that they may result in another prolonged campaign. There is already some evidence of this reluctance among the British public, who seem cautious about any proposed military interventions post-Iraq/Afghanistan. Only 35 per cent of the public supported the 2011 UK airstrikes in Libya (ComRes, 2011), but it is perhaps most telling that 65 per cent believed military involvement would last for 'some time' (BBC News, 2011). Considerations about the morality of campaigns, as well as considerations of their costs, have already been shown to be influential in British public support for Afghanistan and Libya (Reifler et al., 2013) and this may continue in relation to proposed missions.

Another consequence of the negative public perceptions of the Iraq and Afghanistan missions is that there may be increased examination of how the UK's military forces are used in international crises. Such attitudes were evident during the recent crisis in Mali, with public apprehension about exactly what role British troops would play, forcing Prime Minister David Cameron and Foreign Secretary William Hague to insist that there would be no commitment to combat roles (BBC News, 2013; Coughlin, 2013). Public support came with strict conditions; provision of military assets was only endorsed if it were limited to intelligence, surveillance and Special Forces (YouGov, 2013a). Debate about the situation in Syria continues, with political leaders in Europe finding it difficult to gain public support for intervention (Ipsos Mori, 2013; YouGov, 2013b). The public's perception of a lack of success and high costs in these missions may mean a growing preference of British military force to be used only to address clear and present threats to the UK or increased support for a less active role for the UK in international affairs. If so, this may provide the basis for deepening elite/public tensions over the next decade.

The reluctance of the public to support certain types of military intervention has registered with political leaders in the UK. In a recent statement, the Secretary of State for Defence declared that the British public were war-weary and that only 'extreme circumstances' (e.g. another 9/11 or 7/7) would convince them to support another major overseas campaign (The Telegraph, 2013). The Ministry of Defence is also aware of this risk aversion, with strategists suggesting potential methods to reassure the public about its disquiet over the costs of military action (Quinn, 2013). How long current public caution about military intervention might last is an important question, as is how susceptible public opinion is to change in light of government efforts to persuade the public to support its policies and international events. The power of public opinion to restrict future foreign policy may be one of the most important legacies stemming from the Iraq and Afghanistan missions, with obvious long-term implications for the future of UK security policy.

About the authors

Rachael Gribble is a doctoral researcher investigating the social and psychological wellbeing of UK military partners at the King's Centre for Military Health Research (KCMHR). She previously worked as a Research Assistant at KCMHR on an ESRC-funded study examining British Social Attitudes towards the military and contemporary conflict. Her research interests include mental health, women's health, illness behaviour and offender health. Her previous research has covered attitudes to obesity among stakeholder groups and models of continuity of primary care for people recently

released from prison. Rachael Gribble, King's Centre for Military Health Research, King's College London, Weston Education Centre, 10 Cutcombe Road, London SE5 9RJ, UK. E-mail: rachael.gribble@kcl.ac.uk. Twitter: @kcmhr @rjgribble

Simon Wesley, Co-Director, King's Centre for Military Health Research, King's College London, Weston Education Centre, 10 Cutcombe Road, London SE5 9RJ, UK.

Susan Klein, Director, Aberdeen Centre for Trauma Research, Robert Gordon University, Garthdee House, Garthdee Road, Aberdeen AB10 7QB, UK.

David A. Alexander, Aberdeen Centre for Trauma Research, Robert Gordon University, Garthdee House, Garthdee Road, Aberdeen AB10 7QB, UK.

Christopher Dandeker, Co-Director, King's Centre for Military Health Research, King's College London, Weston Education Centre, 10 Cutcombe Road, London SE5 9RJ, UK.

Nicola T. Fear, Co-Director, King's Centre for Military Health Research, King's College London, Weston Education Centre, 10 Cutcombe Road, London SE5 9RJ, UK.

Correspondence to Rachael Gribble.

Note

1 Further information on the methodology of the British Social Attitudes survey can be found at www.bsa-29.natcen.ac.uk/read-the-report/technical-details.aspx

Appendix A

Table A1: The British public's perception of the purposes of the Iraq (I) and Afghanistan (A) missions by approval and perceived success

Public support	Iraq % (N = 1,316) [†]		X2	(df)	Afghanistan % (N = 1,660) [†]		X2	(df)
	To ensure Western oil supplies	To prevent acquisition of WMD			To make Afghanistan a stable country	To protect UK from risk of terrorism		
Right to go to Iraq/Afghanistan								
Agree	18 (132)	30 (159) ^a			39 (291) ^b	34 (276)		
Neither	13 (96)	19 (103) ^a			23 (172)	21 (184)		
Disagree	69 (534) ^b	51 (277)	103.13***	4	38 (317)	45 (388) ^a	35.17***	4
Mission achieved/is achieving success								
Agree	20 (151)	34 (175) ^a			37 (275) ^b	33 (270)		
Neither	30 (225)	34 (180)			34 (272)	33 (294)		
Disagree	50 (385) ^b	33 (179)	106.41***	4	29 (235)	34 (280) ^a	20.66***	4

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.[†] Percentages may not equal 100 per cent due to rounding. N may be larger than sample N for Iraq and Afghanistan groups as respondents were able to give up to two answers. Don't Know, Refusal for Right and Success not included (n = 87–91). Other possible responses for purpose not included (n = 1,616–2,030).^{a,b} indicate difference in column proportions significant at $p < 0.05$.

Table A2: The British public's estimates of UK military fatalities and perceived success of the missions

	Mission of UK armed forces in Iraq/ Afghanistan achieved success % (N)*†			X2	(df)
	Agree (N = 713)	Neither (N = 835)	Disagree (N = 1,071)		
Estimate of UK casualties					
Under-estimated	31 (217)	32 (232)	37 (274)		
Accurate	29 (158)	32 (179)	39 (211)		
Over-estimated	26 (338)	32 (424)	42 (586)	1.84	4

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

† Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding. Don't Know, Refusal not included ($n = 692$). Denominators may vary as respondents did not complete all relevant questions. Data combined from Iraq and Afghanistan groups.

Table A3: The British public's estimates of UK military fatalities and perceived purposes of the missions

	Iraq % (N = 1,044)*†	X2	(df)	Afghanistan % (N = 1,432)*†	X2	(df)
	To ensure Western oil supplies	To prevent acquisition of WMD		To make Afghanistan a stable country	To protect UK from risk of terrorism	
Estimate of UK casualties						
Under-estimated	10 (65)	13 (51)		46 (326)	44 (324)	
Accurate	24 (152) ^b	18 (78)		14 (103)	19 (151) ^a	
Over-estimated	66 (415)	69 (283)	15.67**	40 (260)	37 (268)	23.72***
			4			4

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

† Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding. N may be larger than sample N for Iraq and Afghanistan groups as respondents were able to give up to two answers. Don't Know, Refusal for estimates of casualties not included (n = 656). Other possible responses for purpose not included (n = 1,844–2,302).

^{a,b} indicate difference in column proportions significant at $p < 0.05$.

Table A4: Perceptions of mission's success and sociodemographics

Sociodemographics	Mission of UK armed forces in Iraq/Afghanistan achieved success % (N) ^{*†}		
	Agree (N = 881)	Neither (N = 1,056)	Disagree (N = 1,283)
Gender			
Male (ref)	31 (438)	29 (402)	40 (588)
Female	25 (443)	37 (654)	38 (695)
Adj. OR (95% CI) [‡]	0.64 (0.52–0.79)	1.0	0.75 (0.62–0.91)
Age			
18–24	32 (72)	40 (85)	28 (60)
Adj. OR (95% CI) [‡]	1.02 (0.66–1.58)	1.0	0.41 (0.26–0.62)
25–34	29 (139)	37 (191)	35 (178)
Adj. OR (95% CI) [‡]	0.97 (0.69–1.38)	1.0	0.57 (0.42–0.78)
35–44	31 (181)	32 (196)	37 (208)
Adj. OR (95% CI) [‡]	1.23 (0.88–1.72)	1.0	0.70 (0.52–0.95)
45–54	28 (148)	28 (158)	43 (246)
Adj. OR (95% CI) [‡]	1.19 (0.84–1.69)	1.0	0.93 (0.68–1.27)
55–64	27 (144)	33 (172)	40 (215)
Adj. OR (95% CI) [‡]	1.00 (0.72–1.39)	1.0	0.79 (0.59–1.05)
65+ (ref)	24 (197)	30 (252)	46 (375)

* Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding. Don't Know, Refusal not included (n = 3–91). Denominators may vary as respondents did not complete all relevant questions.

† 'Male/65+ /Neither' baseline.

‡ Adjusted for gender, age, education, military connection, mission.

Table A5: The British public's perception of UK military fatalities by sociodemographics

Sociodemographics	Estimate of UK military fatalities % (N)*†		
	Under-estimated (N = 682)	Accurate (N = 656)	Over-estimated (N = 1,317)
Gender			
Male (ref)	28 (353)	24 (307)	49 (608)
Female	28 (377)	17 (245)	55 (765)
Adj. OR (95% CI)‡	1.27 (0.98–1.65)	1.0	1.59 (1.26–2.00)
Age			
18–24	24 (42)	15 (24)	61 (107)
Adj. OR (95% CI)‡	1.78 (0.93–3.38)	1.0	2.49 (1.41–4.41)
25–34	30 (124)	12 (50)	58 (247)
Adj. OR (95% CI)‡	2.36 (1.48–3.78)	1.0	2.74 (1.79–4.20)
35–44	26 (129)	21 (98)	52 (265)
Adj. OR (95% CI)‡	1.34 (0.88–2.04)	1.0	1.35 (0.93–1.96)
45–54	30 (133)	21 (104)	49 (235)
Adj. OR (95% CI)‡	1.53 (1.01–2.31)	1.0	1.27 (0.89–1.82)
55–64	28 (127)	22 (101)	50 (221)
Adj. OR (95% CI)‡	1.35 (0.91–2.01)	1.0	1.22 (0.87–1.72)
65+ (ref)	26 (175)	28 (174)	46 (297)
Education			
No qualifications	29 (200)	26 (175)	45 (304)
O level/CSE or equivalent	26 (153)	19 (124)	55 (340)
Adj. OR (95% CI)‡	1.03 (0.71–1.51)	1.0	1.30 (0.93–1.82)
Higher level/A level or equivalent	26 (173)	20 (142)	53 (366)
Adj. OR (95% CI)‡	0.96 (0.66–1.40)	1.0	1.12 (0.80–1.56)
Degree/postgraduate	28 (160)	16 (84)	55 (285)
Adj. OR (95% CI)‡	1.30 (0.86–1.95)	1.0	1.49 (1.03–2.15)

* Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding. Don't Know, Refusal not included (n = 3–656). Denominators may vary as respondents did not complete all relevant questions.

† 'Iraq/Accurate' baseline.

‡ Adjusted for gender, age, education, military connection, mission.

Table A6: Sensitivity analysis of the British public's estimate of UK military fatalities

	Iraq % (N = 1,673)*	Afghanistan % (N = 1,638)*	Unadj. OR (95% CI) [†]	Adj. OR (95% CI) [‡]
Estimate of UK military fatalities				
Under-estimated	30 (374)	23 (308)	0.61 (0.48–0.78)	0.54 (0.42–0.69)
Accurate (300 ± 50)	21 (289)	26 (367)	1.0	1.0
Over-estimated	49 (620)	51 (697)	0.86 (0.70–1.06)	0.79 (0.64–0.98)

* Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding. Don't Know, Refusal not included (n = 656). Denominators may vary as respondents did not complete all relevant questions.

[†] 'Iraq/Accurate' baseline.

[‡] Adjusted for gender, age, education, military connection.

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