

No longer 'best placed to give us real security'. Why I won't be voting Labour in the next general election.

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'Labour is best placed to give us real security,' I wrote seven years ago, in a comment that was published in The Guardian. 'In the election, it is the party that treats society and humanity as continuing entities whose preservation has an absolute value, that is best equipped to secure and empower us,' I maintained, as I stressed the values of human security that I saw embodied by the Labour leadership, through its spirit of justice, humanity, a sense of ethics and compassion. Human security is about protecting the vital core of all human lives in ways that enhance human freedoms and fulfilment. It means protecting fundamental freedoms and using processes that build on people's strengths and aspirations, creating political, social, environmental, economic, military and cultural systems that together give people the building blocks of survival, livelihood and dignity. Personal, national and international security are all parts of our human security and a foreign policy must recognise this fact and this indivisibility. As we approached the 2017 general election, I saw Labour as the party that treated society and humanity as continuing entities, whose preservation had an absolute value, the party that recognised our duties to each other and to the next generation. I saw it as the party that was best equipped, in terms of values and aims, to secure and empower us, as individuals, as a society and as members of a wider human community.

I hadn't always seen it that way.

Following the condemnation, even by many of its then supporters, of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, during which over 7,500 Iraqi civilians were killed in the space of 6 weeks (Iraq Body Count, 2005), Labour lost a significant number of members. The publication of the Iraq Inquiry (Chilcot report) in 2016 contained these key findings:

- The Inquiry considers that a Government has a responsibility to make every reasonable effort to understand the likely and actual effects of its military actions on civilians.
- In the months before the invasion, Mr Blair emphasised the need to minimise the number of civilian casualties arising from an invasion of Iraq. The MOD's responses offered reassurance based on the tight targeting procedures governing the air campaign.
- The MOD made only a broad estimate of direct civilian casualties arising from an attack on Iraq, based on previous operations.
- With hindsight, greater efforts should have been made in the postconflict period to determine the number of civilian casualties and the broader effects of military operations on civilians. More time

was devoted to the question of which department should have responsibility for the issue of civilian casualties than it was to efforts to determine the actual number.

- The Government's consideration of the issue of Iraqi civilian casualties was driven by its concern to rebut accusations that coalition forces were responsible for the deaths of large numbers of civilians, and to sustain domestic support for operations in Iraq (Iraq Inquiry, 2016: 170).

Despite all this, Tony Blair -now Sir Tony Blair- was awarded the Order of the Garter by the Queen in 2022. In a tragicomic article, we wrote that it was fitting that he should be a member of the Order of the Garter.

The Most Noble Order of the Garter is the oldest and most senior order of chivalry for England, Scotland and Wales, founded by King Edward III of England in 1348. Edward is best known for starting one of the most disastrous conflicts of the Middle Ages, the Hundred Years' War, in his efforts to claim the throne of France. Under his command, English soldiers exacerbated the terrible suffering of the French peasantry, killing everyone and pillaging many villages and towns on their way. A practice used by Edward's troops in these wars was the *chevauchée* (armed raid into enemy territory), which can be described as total devastation. Rather than besieging a castle or simply conquering the land, soldiers on a *chevauchée* aimed to create as much destruction, bloodshed and chaos as possible, to both break the morale of French peasants and deny their rulers income and resources. As a result, they would burn crops and buildings, kill civilians and steal anything valuable as quickly as possible, often causing great starvation (Hamourtziadou and Gokay, 2022).

While Blair's New Labour may have been guilty of causing many human insecurities, primarily through two aggressive wars or invasions, including tremendous loss of life (for which there was little concern), by 2017 a new leadership had committed to the protection of human rights, freedoms and dignity in the wider human community. 'For the many, not the few' was what Labour became. For someone like me, who had been documenting civilian deaths in the Middle East for over a decade, that new direction and spirit of Labour was what I had been waiting for. What happened next came as a shock.

During the four years of Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of Labour, he was the victim of a major smear campaign that was focused on his alleged anti-Semitism and his alleged support for terrorism. Eventually, he was blocked from even standing as a Labour candidate. For those of us who had marched against the invasion of Iraq, Corbyn's words on February 15, 2003, still ring tragically true; his humanity and compassion echoing through the years of horror that I recorded:

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For those who say that this is a necessary and just conflict because it will bring about peace and security: September the 11th was a dreadful event. 8000 deaths in Afghanistan brought back none of those who died in the World Trade Centre. Thousands more deaths in Iraq will not make things right. It will set off a spiral of conflict, of hate, of misery, of desperation, that will fuel the wars, the conflict, the terrorism, the depression, and the misery of future generations(Corbyn, 2003).

Iraq Body Count has so far documented 210,519 civilian deaths.

By 2023, the Labour Party leadership (which had been behind the defamation and ousting of Corbyn) was expressing its view that Israel had the right to starve the people of Gaza. Labour leader Keir Starmer (a former human rights lawyer!) endorsed Israel's decision to deprive 2.3 million Palestinian civilians in Gaza of food, water and electricity, while at the same time bombing them. By now, four months into the latest aggression, over 30,000 civilians have been killed in Gaza, over 67,000 injured and 2 million are homeless, their homes, schools and hospitals destroyed, according to Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor (2024).

As a casualty recorder of nearly two decades, I have seen the devastation that states and their armies repeatedly justify, in the name of their 'war on terror'. In Afghanistan, in Iraq, in Chechnya and in Gaza, hundreds of thousands have lost their lives, as powerful states 'fight terrorists'. I know well what terrorism is, having documented over 60,000 civilian killings perpetrated by ISIS in and around Mosul. I know of the torture, the executions and the mass graves still discovered in ISIS-controlled areas. I also know the immeasurable harm state aggression can do to the unarmed population.

A Labour Party that does not recognise that a state can be a terrorist, a Labour Party that stands behind actions that cause the violation of every aspect of human life, dignity and liberty, is not a party that can provide real security. It is not a party that will get my vote.

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