Book Review

Warren Chin. *Britain and the War on Terror: Policy, Strategy and Operations.***Dorchester: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2013. pp.250. £65.00. ISBN: 978-0-7546-9528-8**

Reviewed by Sarah V. Marsden

Whilst it may feel that the 'war on terror' has been covered exhaustively (sometimes exhaustingly) in the literature, a comprehensive overview of the conflict from the British perspective has so far been missing. In *Britain and the War on Terror*, Warren Chin addresses this gap, offering a carefully focused account of the UK's strategy in the conflict. Exploring Britain's role from 2001-2010, Chin's evaluation of the UK's conduct since 9/11 is far from complementary, concluding that: "the British war on terror represented a classic example of how not to plan and conduct a war." (p.214).

In reaching his damning conclusion, Chin first looks at Britain's strategic framework (chapter 2), before reviewing Al Qaeda's ideology, structure and strategy (chapter 3). In the fourth chapter the question of whether the overblown nature of the threat from Iraq was a result of "mendacity on a grand scale or simply incompetence" (p.13) is explored. The UK's occupation of postwar Iraq is the subject of chapter 5, linking the failure of grand strategy to the failure of Britain's military to satisfactorily consolidate their position on the ground. The war in Afghanistan is the subject of chapter 6, before turning to the home front in chapter 7, arguing that although the Labour government prioritized counterterrorism in the UK, an essentially flawed strategy saw it fail.

Given the huge scope of the conflict, Chin does well to focus his account on a number of core questions relating to: the political goals of the war; the extent to which there was an adequate understanding of Al Qaeda; how well means were balanced with ends, and costs against benefits; and whether the government concentrated its resources on the right centre of gravity, something Chin believes to be the 'battle for hearts and minds of the people'.

Although recognising the challenges facing the UK as a junior partner in the coalition, Chin argues that the failures of the war were crucially informed by a failure of grand strategy. Notably, the unrealistic scope of the conflict (to rid the world of terrorism), the insufficient means at the disposal of those charged with prosecuting the war, and an overreliance on technology. A failure to fully consider the consequences of the UK's role in the war, both at home and abroad, is also cited as a significant strategic failure. Describing a somewhat dysfunctional political decision making apparatus, comprising a small coterie of advisors to then Prime Minister Tony Blair, Chin suggests that the failure to properly interrogate the assumptions on which UK strategy was developed informed its subsequent failure. Arguing that, because of a general suspicion about the role of religion in politics, and a belief that Al Qaeda was an essentially irrational adversary, there was a failure to perceive the explicitly political goals Al Qaeda articulated.

Chin offers an important account of some of the political, structural and military issues that informed the problems the UK had in prosecuting the war on terror. However, in interrogating the Labour government's interpretation of the threat from Al Qaeda, Chin is occasionally in danger of taking propagandistic rhetoric as reflecting strategic thinking. Similarly, whilst the account of the UK government's failures is cogent and

clearly evidenced, one of the challenges it faces is occasionally relying too heavily on the wisdom of hindsight. Both the military and the government were operating with far from perfect information. Although Chin acknowledges this, the gap between what we know now, and the significant limitations on both intelligence and knowledge about many of the key actors in the conflict bears emphasising. The book pulls out some of the reasons why this imperfect knowledge led to what he describes as a strategic failure, and it is at the intersection of strategy and some of the underlying ideological and perceptual factors that informed how the conflict developed that some of the book's most profound insights lie.

Britain and the War on Terror goes some way to demonstrating how what might best be described as latent structures informed how the war was prosecuted. Notably, the sometimes biased way religion, and in particular Islam, was perceived, along with an a priori commitment to a specific doctrine (in this case the 'doctrine of the international community', which came to be known as 'Blair's doctrine'), and an almost willful overestimation of Iraqi state capacity. Moreover, the way the Blair government made decisions – the so-called 'kitchen cabinet' – created a situation where events were more easily interpreted in a way consonant with the perceptions of policymakers than their reality. In the context of the very real limits on intelligence and knowledge about the threat that, first Al Qaeda, and then Iraq posed, the result was both flawed policy, and an even more challenging operating environment for British forces in Iraq and Afghanistan than might otherwise have been the case. In Iraq, incomplete and sometimes inaccurate information about the situation on the ground hindered planning, making it more likely that broader structural biases might influence the prosecution of the war and the subsequent occupation. For example, the initial belief that UK experience of counterinsurgency equipped them better than US forces to successfully occupy areas of the country. Reinforced by the uneventful period UK forces spent in their initial 'occupational zone', when the first British units were dispatched to the 'Sunni Triangle', the realization that it was largely the context rather than the expertise of the British military that determined levels of violence, appears to describe a striking example of the fundamental attribution error. That is, the tendency to attribute internal characteristics to explain events, rather than external ones.

A further structural bias important in explaining the challenges facing the British campaign in Iraq was the frame by which the goals of the conflict were understood. Despite the wide-ranging nature of the conflict, the 'war on terror' was an explicitly military construct. It is perhaps not surprising therefore, that Chin's account of the UK's failure to understand the political, social and cultural circumstances in Iraq, was to some extent informed by the primarily military framework by which the conflict was interpreted. Compounded by the hurried timetable for the invasion, Chin describes inadequate liaison between departments, and failure to organise and instigate a satisfactory post-conflict plan. As Chin says: "In the run-up to the war, the intelligence also failed to inform any long-term analysis of the political dimension in Iraq. Instead it focused on generating the information needed to fight the military campaign … and searching for weapons of mass destruction. " (p.129).

The book is at its best when it weaves the theory of insurgency, war and conflict with the record of the UK's involvement. If there is a weakness, it is a heavy reliance on secondary literature which at times equates to a discussion of the received wisdom on particular issues. For example, when describing the challenges facing the Prevent strategy in the UK, although Chin offers a solid review of some of the issues, it provides little new to our understanding of how and why individuals have been influenced by the wider 'war on terror'. Nevertheless, the book offers an important and rigorous account of the UK's strategic approach to the conflict.

If there is a lesson to be drawn from *Britain and the War on Terror* it is that, despite the fact that wars must be waged on the basis of incomplete information, the organisational, cultural and ideological factors that may influence decision making demand challenge and scrutiny. It is for this reason that Chin's book will make valuable reading both for academics and students interested in the UK's approach to the conflict, and for policymakers, who will see many of the pitfalls of failing to properly construct, operationalise and support appropriate strategy writ large on its pages.

About the reviewer: **Sarah Marsden** *is a Lecturer at the Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence at the School of International Relations, University of St Andrews, prior to which she was a Research Fellow and Research Associate at St Andrews and Middlesex Universities respectively. She has a background in Psychology and holds a doctorate in International Relations from the University of St Andrews. Sarah's research revolves around conceptualising and explaining the process and in particular, the decline of terrorism and collective violence. Taking a comparative approach to the outcomes of violent opposition in the Middle East through the lens of contentious politics she has looked at the 'radical right' in Israel and militant Islamism in Yemen. Sarah has also carried out extensive research into individual processes of disengagement and desistance from militancy in the UK, including efforts at 'deradicalisation'. Amongst other journals, she has published in Terrorism and Political Violence, Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression and Critical Studies on Terrorism.*