Are the Armed Forces Understood and Supported By the Public?
British Social Attitudes Towards The Military and Contemporary Conflict

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The overwhelming majority of the British public supports the Armed Forces, but after more than a decade of conflict, there is little agreement with British involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, with one-in-four believing the Iraq intervention was primarily to protect Western oil supplies. While three–quarters of the public had bought a Poppy during the Royal British Legion’s annual Appeal in 2010, one fifth of military personnel reported experiencing hostility from civilians. Only two per cent of the public currently backs the Ministry of Defence’s official definition of a veteran: someone who has completed one day’s training. At least 70 per cent of the public supported priority access to healthcare for wounded ex-Servicemen and women. While the role of the UK Armed Forces in protecting the UK from threats remains paramount in the public’s mind, support for the involvement of British Forces in overseas based anti-terror missions or missions to protect civilians of overseas countries from attacks by their rulers or removing dictators is low.

These are some of the findings from the latest study into the British attitudes towards the military and contemporary conflicts. The work was undertaken by the King’s Centre for Military Health Research (KCMHR) at King’s College London, supported by Aberdeen’s Robert Gordon University, NATCEN Social Research and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The study was based on data collected between June and September 2011 by NATCEN Social Research, as part of the annual British Social Attitudes Survey. More than 3,300\(^1\) people participated in the study, with a response rate of 54 per cent. Both computer-assisted interviews and self-completed questionnaires were used. The findings were presented at a conference held at King’s College London, attended by academics, policy-makers, military personnel and commentators. A second, shorter presentation was made by an Armed Forces representative, focusing on military and public perceptions of ‘veterans’. This was unrelated to the main study, but its subject matter is linked to it. A discussion followed, exploring future public policy. This brief paper

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incorporates both the presentations and the discussion. It does not identify individual contributors.

Attitudes towards the Armed Forces matter, not least to Armed Forces personnel themselves. The conference heard that it is particularly important for those on active service overseas enduring long spells away from home to know that the public is behind them. Public support, it was asserted, is key to the successful recruitment of personnel and the reintegration of those personnel back into civilian life. In the context of public policy, the statutory recognition given to the Armed Forces Covenant attempts to harness the existing public goodwill towards the Service community comprising serving personnel, veterans and their families, primarily through the Armed Forces Corporate Covenant and the Armed Forces Community Covenant. One of the central tenets of the Armed Forces Covenant, special treatment for wounded Service personnel, was supported by almost three-quarters of those surveyed, who endorsed their having priority access to physical and mental healthcare. However, the question was put in general terms, rather than the specific, which might alter the outcome; for example, ‘Would you support Service personnel being given priority treatment ahead of your child or another member of your family?’

Support for the Armed Forces does not correlate with support for the operations in which they have been involved in the past decade. A minority (24 per cent) backs the mission in Iraq; while 29 percent support the operation in Afghanistan. In addition, the majority of the public considers the missions a failure: 30 per cent of those surveyed view Afghanistan as a success, slightly more than the 27 per cent who judge Iraq positively. The public ascribes various reasons for the Iraq intervention, which include those the Blair government gave at the time: that is, preventing Iraq from acquiring WMD (18 per cent) and protecting the UK from Saddam-backed terrorism attack (15 per cent). The largest percentage of those surveyed considered the intervention was to protect Western oil supplies (26 per cent). More than a decade on, a quarter of the British public believes, in colloquial terms, that Iraq was indeed ‘all about oil’.

When questioned about Afghanistan, 30 per cent said the British intervention was to protect the UK from terrorism, while 28 per cent said it was to make Afghanistan more stable, both of which align with official government justifications for British intervention. Of those polled, 14 per cent believed that the mission concerned gaining access to oil and minerals, while
13 per cent said British involvement was primarily to help American and NATO allies. The various objectives ascribed to the mission suggest that its success might be open to broad interpretation. Questioned two years ago, 35 per cent of respondents wanted the immediate, unconditional withdrawal of British troops from Afghanistan, while 34 per cent wanted British forces to leave when the Afghan government could protect its territory and prevent the country being used as a base for terrorists. Only four per cent of those questioned said that they were in favour of what is current government policy; withdrawal at a future fixed date, without conditions.

Despite the lack of support for the missions in Iraq or Afghanistan, the British public overwhelmingly supports those Armed Forces personnel returning from those missions; 94 per cent support the military returning from Iraq, while 91 per cent support those returning from Afghanistan. In addition, 83 per cent stating they have a very high or high opinion of the military, which rises to 92 per cent of those aged 65 years or above and stands at more than seven-in-ten of those aged 18-34 years. The findings are in line with research from almost a decade ago, which showed that in a survey of 15 national brands, the Army was first, with the Conservative Party ranking 14 and McDonalds at 15. However, the Conference was concerned that, with the operations in Afghanistan winding down, public support could ebb away into ‘indifference’. Public policy-making in connection with Forces’ personnel, both serving and ex-service, should take advantage of this ‘window of opportunity’ of existing public support and utilize it to maximum possible advantage.

Both the media and the third sector have a role in generating support and understanding of the Armed Forces. While 60 per cent of the public claims a connection with members of the Armed Forces, this can be indirect, involving colleagues and neighbours, rather than closer relationships such as immediate friends and family. Consequently, notions both of military service and the effects of military service are shaped by civilians, including the media, television and films, as well as by Forces-related charities. As a result, the public may see serving and former Forces personnel, as ‘heroes’ as well as ‘victims’. While three-quarters of respondents thought that current members of the Armed Forces were more likely to be respected than civilians, they also thought them more likely to have a mental illness. In addition, while 60% of the public thought former Forces’ personnel were more likely to be respected than civilians, they were also considered to be more likely to have suicidal tendencies. The findings confirm those in a recent survey by Lord Ashcroft, which
highlighted that nine-in-ten members of the public thought it quite or very common for ex-
Service personnel to have mental, physical or emotional problems as result of service. The
hero-to-victim status of Force’s personnel is particularly underlined by images of
repatriation, particularly at Royal Wootton Bassett, with soldiers being seen as ‘sacrificial
lambs’.

Forces’ charities are often the conduits for public support for the military. Of those
surveyed, two-thirds of the public are aware of a veterans’ charity or organization, in
particular the Royal British Legion and Help for Heroes. The latter was more well-known
among younger respondents, most likely because of the charity’s use of social media and
celebrity endorsement. The conference heard that there is a need for better interoperability
between the (estimated) 2000 Service-related charities, just as there is a need for better
interoperability between charities and government departments and between government
departments.

At the end of a decade of conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan, the ‘veteran-as-victim’ is
emerging as a key narrative, with possible implications for public policy and for serving
members of the Armed Forces and for recent ex-Service personnel, who may be at risk of
being stigmatized by civilian society. However, the MoD and the public are at odds over
who is a ‘veteran’, with implications for the entitlement to rewards and benefits for the
personnel concerned. The majority of the public considers a veteran as having retired from
Service (37 per cent), been deployed on operations (21 per cent) or been deployed
overseas on a combat mission (18 per cent). Only two per cent define a veteran as having
completed one day’s training, which is the current MoD definition, and one that determines
access to veterans’ benefits and services. While there is no consensus about the
contemporary definition of a veteran, it is gradually becoming a catch-all term
encompassing all former Service personnel. The Conference was told that, while in the
United States a veteran is defined as having completed 24 months continuous active
service, in Australia, a veteran is someone who has served on operations. Conversely, in
France a veteran has seen combat or is the holder of a citation. A new definition of the
British veteran was needed, perhaps with various categories signalling involvement in
combat operations or length of service.
The negative portrayal of former Service personnel in Britain by the media and by some charities is doing the Armed Forces a disservice. In addition, with ‘veteran’ applying to 3,700 Early Service Leavers who quit the Armed Forces in Britain each year, civilian society’s misperception of ‘mad, bad or sad’ veterans can be reinforced - to the detriment of those still serving. The Conference heard that the term veteran is ‘misused and abused’, which could dilute the public's support for the Armed Forces. For example, should the veteran-as-victim myth persist, employers’ attitude to employing former Service personnel could change. Currently, 85 per cent of all of those who leave the Armed Forces are re-employed. How well the former Serviceman or woman reintegrates back into civilian society is determined by the attitude of the individual; for those who need it, information and help are available, but, as the Conference heard, it can be difficult to access, particularly for Reservists who are not part of the ‘military family’ in quite the same way as Regulars. While provision exists, access to it - whether by Regulars of Reservists - is a persistent problem. The issues surrounding Reservists’ mental health, examined at a 2012 KCMHR symposium, are being addressed by the MoD, but more needs to be done. (See link below)

The hero-victim dichotomy that has grown up could undermine future recruitment to the Armed Forces. The bleak picture of the veterans’ existence painted by some Service charities - not least the vulnerability of their mental health; often described as a ‘ticking time-bomb’ - is at odds with reality. The conference heard that some charities deploy emotional language to get their message across, with ‘a need to get to donor’s pockets through their hearts’. However, one charity chief who deals with ‘frontline’ provision to those suffering social exclusion, argues that former Service personnel are already ‘citizens-plus’ in terms of the support that they receive. The regional Personnel Recovery Units are key to the MoD’s Defence Recovery Capability. The Conference heard that the relentlessly negative image of military service promoted by civilians could impact on national security, because of both the possible effect on recruitment and on the future public support for any military operations.

The public's view of recent missions and the level of support given to Forces personnel are at odds with those of Servicemen and women. Between November 2007 – September 2009, 5,000 Armed Forces personnel were surveyed as part of the KCMHR study on the health and well-being of those deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan. The military respondents perceived that almost half the public supported the missions (45 per cent), while almost
seven-in-ten perceived the Services to be supportive of them on return (69 per cent). These figures are at odds with civilian perceptions of support for the missions (33 per cent) and support for returning personnel (31 per cent). However, while 20 per cent of military personnel stated reported that they had experienced hostility, 2 per cent of the public – equating to 1.2 million people - admitted to such hostility. The findings point to a large divergence in opinion between serving personnel and the general public, indicating the public’s lack of understanding of the Armed Forces.

Looking forward, the British public has a clear idea of the types of missions that it would like British Forces to become engaged in. Only 9 per cent see the Armed Forces’ role as protecting citizens overseas who are engaged in protest or dissent from attacks by their government, such as the conflicts such as Libya or Syria. Instead, 28 per cent support the Armed Forces’ traditional role of defending the United Kingdom against threats from other states, or assisting police and security forces in anti-terror operations in the UK (24 per cent). One of the legacies of poor public perceptions of the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns may be the reluctance of the British public to become involved in missions that do not have a clear benefit for the UK, with implications for foreign policy. However, the public still see a role for the UK Armed Forces in assisting with NATO or UN missions, creating a tension in how the public views the use of the Armed Forces in their name. In future it will be important to survey more closely the attitudes of minority ethnic communities to the Armed Forces and their missions because by 2030 they will form such an important element of the cohorts from which the Services recruit.

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The work of KCMHR and NATCEN can be accessed at
http://www.kcl.ac.uk/kcmhr/index.aspx
http://www.natcen.ac.uk/