

Tony Blair's bin Laden dossier: a pretext instead of proof

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The document presented to Britain's parliament on October 4 by Prime Minister Tony Blair has been hailed by the media as proof that Osama bin Laden and his Al Qaeda network planned and carried out the September 11 hijack-bombings in New York and Washington. In fact, Blair's dossier is a clumsy patchwork of assertions that provides no actual evidence establishing the guilt of bin Laden or the complicity of his Taliban protectors.

A review of the document makes clear that it is an attempt to silence the demand for proof of bin Laden's guilt, without actually providing it, and thereby ease the path for the US and Britain to launch a war against Afghanistan.

Last week the Bush administration reneged on a promise to make public the evidence it claimed to possess proving bin Laden's guilt. Had everything gone to according to plan, there is little doubt that this state of affairs would have continued and bombs would have rained down on Afghanistan without any pretence of having made the case against bin Laden and the Taliban.

However, Bush faced opposition from Pakistan and the Arab regimes, which feared an explosive reaction should the US begin bombing a Muslim country without any concrete proof to justify such an action. The document presented by Blair was part of an international effort to placate America's wavering allies and give them something to present before their own people.

The dossier begins with the following caveat: "This document does not purport to provide a prosecutable case against Osama bin Laden in a court of law." This acknowledgment is rationalized on the grounds that "Intelligence often cannot be used evidentially, due both to the strict rules of admissibility and to the need to protect the safety of sources."

Three things can be said regarding this statement.

First, the premise that a lower standard of evidence is sufficient to justify a war than would be the norm for establishing innocence or guilt in a court of law is, at best, dubious. The incalculable consequences of a military attack argue for a standard of proof no less strict than that required in a legal case. In court what is at stake is the fate of the defendants as individuals, whereas the US and Britain are about to launch a military campaign in which the lives of an unknown number of innocent civilians are threatened.

Second, the claim that intelligence considerations prohibit those about to wage war from presenting evidence justifying such a course is a blanket rationalization for any and all military action. Even if one grants the legitimacy of withholding some evidence, it is not credible to assert that on security grounds no concrete proof can be made public. Such a stance amounts to an assertion of the right to play judge, jury and executioner.

Third, Blair's document is not a serious presentation of evidence that falls somewhat short of the rigorous standards of a legal indictment. It is devoid of any independently verifiable facts that establish the guilt of either bin Laden, Al Qaeda or the Taliban in connection with the September 11 terror attacks.

Most of what the document puts forward was previously reported in the media. All of its allegations are unsubstantiated. The reader is expected to accept its claims on faith.

The document is divided into three main headings. The most crucial is the section purporting to deal with Al Qaeda's role in the September 11 terror attacks. This constitutes just nine points out of the seventy contained in the 15-page dossier.

In an evident attempt to obscure the flimsy character of this pivotal section, the authors have filled the bulk of the document with pages purportedly outlining Al Qaeda's previous involvement in terrorist attacks against the US, together with a presentation of the historical origins of bin Laden's Al Qaeda network and the Taliban regime.

In the section dealing with September 11, only one apparently concrete connection between Al Qaeda and the hijack-bombings is made: the claim that of the 19 identified hijackers, "At least three of them have already been positively identified as associates of Al Qaeda. One has been identified as playing key roles in both the East African embassy attacks and the USS Cole attack."

But this statement raises more questions than it answers. If the identities of the three are known, why are they not named? What possible harm could it do?

Secondly, the description of the three as "associates of Al Qaeda" is so broad and amorphous as to render it almost meaningless. The document acknowledges that Al Qaeda is a loose organization of many different groupings. Even if the three were in some way identified with Al Qaeda, this by itself would not prove that either Al Qaeda or bin Laden personally planned or ordered the September 11 attacks. Finally, the document merely asserts the existence of evidence linking the three to Al Qaeda, without actually presenting factual proof.

The Bush administration, in particular, treads on thin ice when it speaks loosely of "links" between bin Laden, bin Laden's associates and various other individuals. None other than the *Wall Street Journal* reported in a September 27 article of documented links between leading figures in the Republican Party, including George W. Bush's father, the former president, and the bin Laden family.

The *Journal* wrote: "Among its far-flung business interests, the well-heeled Saudi Arabian clan—which says it is estranged from Osama—is an investor in a fund established by the Carlyle Group, a well-connected Washington merchant bank specializing in buyouts of defense and aerospace companies.

"Through this investment and its ties to Saudi royalty, the bin Laden family has become acquainted with some of the biggest names in the Republican Party. In recent years, former President Bush, ex-Secretary of State James Baker and ex-Secretary of Defense Frank Carlucci have made the pilgrimage to the bin Laden family's headquarters in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia."

Regarding the events of September 11, the document goes on to make further assertions: that bin Laden himself declared shortly before

September 11 that he was preparing a major attack on America and called close associates to return to Afghanistan from other parts of the world by September 10; and that “Since 11 September we have learned that one of bin Laden’s closest and most senior associates was responsible for the detailed planning of the attacks.”

Once again a man considered to be at the very top of bin Laden’s organization, who is allegedly directly responsible for the terror outrage, is not named. Why?

There follows this significant statement: “There is evidence of a very specific nature relating to the guilt of bin Laden and his associates that is too sensitive to release.”

Whether or not the authors of the document are aware of it, this sentence amounts to a tacit admission that they have produced nothing of a “specific nature” proving a connection between bin Laden and the September 11 attacks.

The evidence regarding previous terror attacks is hardly more substantial. Names and incidents are cited in connection with a number of high-profile attacks, but these are garnered from the trial testimony of a few individual defendants made under extreme duress.

To fill in the obvious gaps, the following assertion is made in an extended preamble dealing with the history of Al Qaeda: “Osama bin Laden has claimed credit for the attack on US soldiers in Somalia in October 1993, which killed 18; for the attack on the US Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998 which killed 224 and injured nearly 5000; and were linked [sic] to the attack on the USS Cole on 12 October 2000, in which 17 crew members were killed and 40 others injured.”

No such admission has ever been made, and none is cited in the document. Instead the reader is directed toward various anti-American statements and comments from bin Laden supportive of anti-US terrorist attacks.

(The inclusion of the attack on American soldiers in Somalia is entirely out of place. That incident cannot legitimately be considered a terrorist attack, since the Somalis involved were opposing US soldiers, not civilians, and their resistance was part of a struggle against a US military occupation of their country. The US troops, moreover, were involved in an aggressive action to capture Somali officials who had run afoul of American designs.)

The actual material presented in the document argues against the assertion that bin Laden claimed responsibility for the named terrorist attacks. When bin Laden was questioned by *Time* magazine regarding the August 1998 bombings of the US Embassies in Nairobi, Kenya and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, he refused to either confirm or deny any responsibility. His quoted reply is simply a restatement of his fatwa, followed by the declaration, “Our job is to instigate and, by the grace of God, we did that, and certain people responded to this instigation.” When asked if he knew the attackers, bin Laden simply called them “real men.” As deplorable as such statements are, they do not constitute an admission of responsibility.

In point 51, the dossier notes the existence of documents in which an unrelated group, the Islamic Army for the Liberation of the Holy Places, claims responsibility for the East African embassy bombings. The Blair dossier simply dismisses this inconvenient information with the claim that the organization is “fictitious.”

One statement in the document undermines its own invocation of security needs as the justification for omitting specific evidence. In point 14, the dossier asserts that the US government “well before September 11 2001” handed over evidence of Al Qaeda’s guilt in orchestrating the East African embassy attacks to the Taliban.

If the US government felt it could provide secret intelligence to the Taliban, whom it now accuses of sponsoring a global anti-American murder incorporated, how can it cite the need for secrecy and the protection of sources to justify concealing crucial evidence from its own people and the rest of the world today?

Politically, the most significant part of Blair’s dossier is the section that purports to outline the historical origins of Al Qaeda and the Taliban regime. This potted history, by way of omission, points to critical facts that both the US and Britain are intent on obscuring because they reveal the political responsibility of successive governments in Washington and London for the rise of bin Laden and the Taliban, and the spread throughout Central Asia and the Middle East of the reactionary brand of nationalism and religious obscurantism which they embody.

The document takes as its starting point the year 1989, when, it claims, bin Laden and others founded Al Qaeda. The authors conveniently omit any reference to the previous decade, during which the American CIA, with the assistance of the British Special Air Service (SAS), funded, trained and armed the Mujahedin as part of the Cold War struggle against the Soviet Union, which invaded Afghanistan in 1979 and withdrew 10 years later. Among those with whom the Americans worked to undermine Soviet influence was Osama bin Laden.

This is the real history, without knowledge of which it is impossible to understand the destruction of secular political forces in Afghanistan and the sudden rise to prominence of the Taliban, whose ideological and political roots lie in the Mujahedin groups that were nurtured by the US. (The US-Taliban connection was evidenced by the initial tacit support of Washington for the Taliban regime when it took power in 1996.)

If, after three-and-a-half weeks, this crude admixture of unsubstantiated assertions and historical falsifications is all that can be presented to the public, there can be only two possible explanations:

Either the US government has no proof of a direct connection between Osama bin Laden, the Taliban and the September 11 attacks, or it cannot release the evidence it has because the information would in some way implicate individuals or organizations connected to American intelligence or that of an allied state.

In exposing the fraudulent character of this document, the *World Socialist Web Site* is in no way motivated by a desire to protect bin Laden or the Taliban, or maintain their innocence in regard to last month’s attacks. They may very well be complicit in the hijack-bombings. Their politics and methods are deeply reactionary and hostile to the interests of the working class and oppressed masses in the Middle East, Central Asia and every other part of the world.

But our rejection of Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism does not in the slightest lessen our opposition to the US and British governments and their militaristic agenda. The fact that they have failed to make public any serious evidence establishing the culpability of those singled out for retaliation is of enormous significance. It shows that they have seized on the September 11 tragedy as an opportunity to pursue an international agenda long in the making. They are seeking to whip up a war fever so they can pursue geo-strategic aims in the oil-rich Middle East and Central Asian regions in a manner that would have been politically unthinkable prior to September 11.

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