

Former British home secretary admits calling for bombing of Al-Jazeera

UK government suppresses evidence that Bush did the same

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More evidence has emerged indicating that Qatar-based Al-Jazeera TV was a target for deliberate bombing by the Bush administration.

A recently aired Channel 4 *Dispatches* programme on the diaries of former British Home Secretary David Blunkett revealed an entry from April 2003, during the US-British invasion of Iraq, in which Blunkett noted he had urged Prime Minister Tony Blair to bomb Al-Jazeera's Baghdad television transmitter. Interviewed on the *Dispatches* program, Blunkett acknowledged having made such a proposal to Blair.

Asked whether he considered Al-Jazeera a civilian target, Blunkett replied, "Well, I don't think that there are targets in a war that you can rule out because you don't actually have military personnel inside them if they are attempting to win a propaganda battle on behalf of your enemy."

When Blunkett was asked whether he thought his suggestion was against international law, he replied, "I don't think for a minute in previous wars we'd have thought twice about ensuring that a propaganda mechanism on the soil of the country you were invading would actually continue being able to propagandise against you."

Just two weeks after the April 8, 2003, diary entry, a US missile hit an electricity generator at Al-Jazeera's office in Baghdad. Reporter Tareq Ayyoub was killed and another staff member wounded.

Al-Jazeera's editor-in-chief, Ahmed Al-Sheikh said, "This adds to the growing evidence that will one day prove that the attack on Al-Jazeera was premeditated...at the highest levels. Al-Jazeera was being targeted at the time because the people who were waging war on Iraq didn't like what it was showing. We talk about terrorism. This is pure terrorism."

Al-Jazeera is requesting a statement from the Blair government.

Blunkett's admission is even more damning coming as it does amidst ongoing efforts by the British government to suppress evidence that President Bush had discussed with

Blair the possible bombing of Al-Jazeera's headquarters in Qatar.

On November 22 of last year, the *Daily Mirror* published a front-page exclusive on leaked minutes of a conversation between Bush and Blair in Washington on April 16, 2004, during a major US offensive against the Iraqi city of Fallujah. Also present was Secretary of State Colin Powell.

The *Mirror* reported that the minutes recorded a threat by Bush to unleash "military action" against Al-Jazeera's head offices in Doha, the capital of Qatar.

An unnamed source told the newspaper, "The memo is explosive and hugely damaging to Bush. He made clear he wanted to bomb Al-Jazeera in Qatar and elsewhere. Blair replied that would cause a big problem. There's no doubt what Bush wanted to do—and no doubt Blair didn't want him to do it."

Another source added, "Bush was deadly serious, as was Blair. That much is absolutely clear from the language used by both men."

The two people alleged to have been involved in leaking the minutes, then-Labour MP Tony Clarke and civil servant David Keogh, his former researcher, were charged under the Official Secrets Act, and the attorney general, Lord Goldsmith, threatened the *Mirror* with prosecution unless it agreed not to publish further revelations. The newspaper agreed to comply.

Former Labour Defence Minister Peter Kilfoyle tabled a parliamentary motion calling on Blair to release the full text of the memo.

Having sought a prosecution of the two in order to intimidate others and suppress further reports, the government was faced with the difficulty of needing to present evidence in a court trial that could implicate the US and Britain in planning a war crime.

To prevent this, it sought to have the trial held in secret, a request that was agreed to on October 9 of this year by Old Bailey judge Mr. Justice Aikens. The media were barred

from a pre-trial meeting held in private that day. Parts of the trial, delayed until April next year, will now be held in secret.

The government argued for secrecy based on the claim that the memo represented a danger to national security.

Sir Nigel Sheinwald, Blair's foreign policy adviser, who was present at the Washington meeting, signed a certificate in March to persuade the judge that the trial should be held in secret—before Keogh and O'Connor were even charged. It argued that the minutes “could have a serious impact upon the international relations” of the United Kingdom, and were likely to damage the “promotion or protection” of British interests, including those of British citizens in Iraq.

Government lawyers requested an adjournment of the pre-trial hearings until April 2006 at the same time on the grounds that they needed a certificate from then-Foreign Secretary Jack Straw. Straw never signed a certificate. This was left to his successor, Margaret Beckett, who only did so in June.

Beckett continues to claim that disclosing the memo would have a “serious negative impact on UK/US diplomatic relations. The ultimate consequence...would be a substantial risk of harm to national security.”

“My assessment is that this risk is of such magnitude to outweigh the interest of open public justice,” she added.

Calling these arguments “deeply disturbing,” the *Guardian's* security affairs editor Richard Norton-Taylor draws attention to how Mr. Justice Aikens's ruling accepts and even reinforces the government's arguments to suppress the truth.

He notes that the ruling accepts the claim that disclosing the contents of the memo would have a “detrimental impact” on “diplomatic and political relations” between the UK and the US, and would have “serious consequences” for “the national safety or national security of the United Kingdom in the current international situation.”

Norton-Taylor continues: “The contents of the memo would be read ‘throughout the world,’ he [the judge] warns—a prospect, it seems, too awful to contemplate. There would be ‘different views on the implications of what was stated’ in the memo. ‘It is reasonable to conclude,’ he warns, that some individuals, parts of the media, and ‘even some states,’ might react ‘very unfavourably’ to the memo's contents. This might be ‘for no other reason than the topic under discussion was US/UK policy concerning the state of Iraq at a delicate time.’ And he comes with a trump card. He says: ‘It is also legitimate, in my view, for the court to bear in mind the ever-present threat to national safety which is posed by the possibility of terrorist acts by extremists in the UK.’ “

Norton-Taylor concludes, “Not content with hoisting the

flag of the terror threat, the judge says that, had he not agreed to a private trial, the government might have dropped the case and in future would be reluctant to prosecute at all in ‘this type of case.’ “

This argument never challenges the authenticity of the minutes or their accuracy. Rather, it states that revealing their contents—i.e., a discussion of a war crime—would arouse justifiable anger internationally and therefore damage Britain's national interests—particularly by endangering its alliance with Washington.

The ruling then implies that those demanding an open accounting risk giving ammunition and providing succour to terrorists. And, by forcing the government to make a public accounting, they might prevent it from bringing both this and similar cases against whistleblowers in future.

Mark Stephens, the defence lawyer acting for Al-Jazeera, told reporters, “The bottom line is that there is no national security involvement [in the case]. What is being protected from us is evidence of a war crime.”

Mr. Stephens is appealing to Richard Thomas, the information commissioner, over the government's refusal to release the memo under the Freedom of Information Act.

Lawyers for Keogh and O'Connor have not issued a substantive comment.

Al-Jazeera's offices were hit by the US on two separate occasions. As well as the 2003 missile attack in Baghdad that killed Ayyoub, on November 13, 2001, two US “smart-bombs” hit Al-Jazeera's office in Kabul, Afghanistan, destroying the building.

Al-Jazeera said that the coordinates of its Kabul office were known to the US. And on February 24, 2003, six weeks before Ayyoub was killed, Al-Jazeera's Mohammed Jasim al-Ali had sent a letter with the coordinates of the Baghdad offices to Victoria Clarke, the US assistant secretary of defense for public affairs.

Ayyoub's widow has filed a lawsuit against the Bush administration for her husband's death in 2003. Her attorney, Hamdi Rifai, told reporters that “the case was being launched in part because of the disclosure last year in London's *Daily Mirror* that President Bush told British Prime Minister Tony Blair of his desire to bomb Al-Jazeera's headquarters in Qatar.”



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