

# British politicians and media dismiss WikiLeaks details of Afghanistan war crimes

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28 July 2010

Britain's political elite are attempting to play down the so-called Afghan War Diary—the 92,000 documents published by WikiLeaks, details of which are being serialised in the *Guardian* newspaper.

For nine years Britain's ruling circles have presented the intervention in Afghanistan as a fight for the “hearts and minds” of the Afghan people. In the face of widespread public opposition to the occupation, both the Labour government and now the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition have insisted that it is morally and politically justifiable.

The documents published by WikiLeaks—consisting of battlefield reports written by US army personnel—expose such claims as lies. They lift the lid on just some of the terror and violence routinely meted out against the Afghan people.

From shooting rampages by army personnel against innocent civilians, targeted assassinations of supposed Taliban leaders by the secretive Task Force 373 unit, to the indiscriminate use of bombs and unmanned drones against entire villages, they show the occupation for what it really is—a brutal war of colonial subjugation.

The documents implicate Britain, which has 10,000 troops in Afghanistan, in these war crimes. They identify British troops as being responsible for the killing of 26 civilians—including 16 children. Amongst these are four shootings by unidentified British units between October 4 and November 6, 2007, in which one civilian and five others were killed, and a bombing raid by a Harrier jet that killed eight people.

Every effort is being made to brush these revelations to one side, especially under conditions in which the coalition government has insisted that British troops will remain in Afghanistan for at least another four years.

An official statement from Downing Street said only that it “lamented” the leak, while the Ministry of Defence said it “would be inappropriate to speculate on specific cases without further verification of the alleged actions”.

A feature of the leaked documents is their descriptions of

the hostility of the Afghan population to the occupying forces. They record the belief amongst many that the US and its allies are working hand in glove with the Taliban, such is the devastation that the occupation has caused.

Still, Foreign Secretary William Hague spuriously warned that the documents could “poison the atmosphere in Afghanistan”. The UK is “working hard with our allies in Afghanistan on improving security on the ground, in increasing the capacity of the Afghan government”, he continued, “so we are not going to spend our time looking at leaks”.

As yet there has been no official statement by Liberal leader and Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg on the leaked documents. Only last week Clegg told parliament that the Iraq war had been “illegal”. But the Liberal Democrats have long portrayed the Afghan intervention as a “just” cause, describing their attitude to the ongoing occupation as “critically supportive”.

Labour too has remained largely silent. One of the few comments on the WikiLeaks documents was from David Miliband, former foreign secretary and current Labour leadership contender. Passing over the fact that it was the Labour government that had enthusiastically sanctioned the US-led invasion in 2001, he claimed that the leaks showed “something that has been known for some time. We cannot kill our way out of an insurgency”.

The “battle for power is fought in the minds of the local population, insurgents and western publics”, he went on, claiming that the purpose of the “military effort and civilian improvement is to create the conditions for political settlement”.

In its efforts to minimise the WikiLeaks revelations, official political circles are once again relying on the services of the corporate media, which, for the most part, has questioned the “legality” of leaking the documents so as to cover over the illegality of the activities they detail.

The Murdoch press has been the most strident in this regard. Denouncing those responsible for the leak as “traitors”, an editorial in the *Sun* on Tuesday asked, “Who

benefits from yesterday's massive leak of military papers: the evil Taliban or British squaddies?

"Who will be cheering loudest that the allies have a traitor in their midst: the mad mullahs of Iran who supply weapons to the terrorists? Or the world leaders who want to make Afghanistan a country free from fear?"

Details that some 2,000 individuals had been targeted for assassination only confirmed the "blindingly obvious", it went on. "[O]f course" US forces are hunting "Taliban leaders for 'kill or capture' without trial". "This is a war in which our enemies want to destroy Western civilisation".

Depicting publication of the documents as a "left-wing" attempt to "undermine the morale of the frontline men and women who are prepared to give their lives for freedom", the *Sun* demanded the immediate prosecution of those responsible for the leaks.

Similarly, the *Telegraph* opined that the leaks "should not damage the war effort" and "distract the allies from their vital mission".

In what is a common thread running through much of the coverage on the leaks, the *Telegraph* rejected comparisons between the Afghan Diary and publication of the "Pentagon Papers" in 1971 as "wholly erroneous".

"The Pentagon Papers exposed systematic lying by the American government over the conduct of the war in Vietnam. There is no such smoking gun in these leaks", it argued. All the WikiLeaks documents provided, it went on, were "an unvarnished narrative account of an immensely difficult war".

Moreover, the leak "debunks the myth that 21st-century warfare can be in some way 'clinical', where only the enemy gets hurt. War has never been, nor will ever be, like that".

The newspaper also attacked the "carefully choreographed dissemination of the leaked material" as an effort to "to fuel anti-war sentiment".

In fact, whatever the intentions of those responsible for the leaks, the *Guardian*, which has published much of the material contained in the documents, has not called for an end to the war—either immediately or at any time in the near future.

The *Guardian* editorial on July 25 said that the "Afghan Diary" showed a "messy", "confused" conflict, and that many reading the logs "may suspect there is sometimes a casual disregard for the lives of innocents".

Much of the editorial, however, was concerned with the documents accounts of how "Iran's and Pakistan's intelligence agencies run riot", in Afghanistan. Whatever the exact truth of these accounts, it continued, they underscored that "the status quo is unacceptable".

The *Guardian* wants a change in the tactics of the

occupying powers, rather than an end to the occupation itself. "A war fought ostensibly for the hearts and minds of Afghans cannot be won like this", it concluded.

Although the *Independent* was more forthright in opining that the leaks raised "profound questions about this war", it also did not question the ongoing occupation. Until the US, Britain and others "make a serious commitment to enhance transparency", it stated, "the appalling picture these documents paint of the Afghan war remains the reality".

Amongst the more revealing comments was that by *London Evening Standard* defence correspondent Robert Fox.

His column underscored that the Obama administration's firing of General Stanley McChrystal and his replacement by General David Petraeus in June had nothing to do with restoring "civilian authority" over the military as claimed, but was aimed at brutally escalating the war.

Fox indicated how some now hope to utilise the leaks to back this strategy.

"In a curious way", he wrote, "these leaks strengthen the position" of Petraeus. The general is opposed to "artificial deadlines for handovers or withdrawals", Fox explained, and "wants to amend rules of engagement, giving US forces (who have been complaining they are hamstrung) a freer hand to call in air strikes and artillery when under fire".

Petraeus "looks likely to pursue the expansion of the war into Pakistan's tribal areas, already subject to an increasing number of drone attacks and the occasional special forces incursion. The numbers of US troops based in Pakistan is small but growing".

"If we are serious about Afghanistan, and its impact on world peace, we should forget about Obama-Cameron timelines for the big pull-out", Fox continued.

"Deadlines only make sense if they match the facts on the ground, and the facts of the war can be pretty grim, as Wikileaks reminds us".



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