

WikiLeaks releases documents exposing US war crimes in Iraq

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The secret US army files made public Friday by the WikiLeaks web site provide massive documentation of the criminal character of the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq.

WikiLeaks posted nearly 400,000 army field reports, filed by low-ranking soldiers after combat or reconnaissance operations, describing the death tolls due to US military action, attacks by anti-US insurgents, or the internecine civil conflict sparked by the US occupation. The reports cover the period from January 1, 2004 to December 31, 2009, and therefore provide no data on the mass killings that took place during the initial US invasion in March 2003.

The documents were made available several weeks in advance to selected news organizations, including the *Guardian* in London, the *New York Times*, the German news magazine *Der Spiegel*, the French daily *Le Monde*, and al Jazeera, the Arabic-language broadcaster based in Qatar. These outlets published extensive accounts of the underlying material, posting them on their web sites Friday night.

The *Guardian* focuses on the scale of the bloodshed, including 15,000 civilians killed in incidents not previously reported by the US military—which publicly denied it was even counting civilian deaths, while keeping an extensive internal log. The newspaper’s report begins: “A grim picture of the US and Britain’s legacy in Iraq has been revealed in a massive leak of American military documents that detail torture, summary executions and war crimes.”

The newspaper continues: “The war logs, seen by the *Guardian*, contain a horrific dossier of cases where US troops killed innocent civilians at checkpoints, on Iraq’s roads and during raids on people’s homes. The victims include dozens of women and children. The US rarely admitted their deaths publicly.”

The *Guardian* also details the failure of the US military to investigate torture and murder by the Iraqi forces recruited as part of the buildup of a puppet regime in Baghdad. The newspaper states: “Numerous reports of detainee abuse, often supported by medical evidence, describe prisoners shackled, blindfolded and hung by wrists or ankles and

subjected to whipping, punching, kicking or electric shocks. Six reports end with a detainee’s apparent death.”

Another article in the *Guardian* draws attention to the role of the Wolf Brigade, an Iraqi special forces unit created by the US military and directed by Colonel James Steele, whose experience in counterinsurgency, torture and murder includes his role as an adviser to US-backed death squads in El Salvador during the 1980s.

According to the newspaper: “The Wolf Brigade was created and supported by the US in an attempt to re-employ elements of Saddam Hussein’s Republican Guard, this time to terrorise insurgents. Members typically wore red berets, sunglasses and balaclavas, and drove out on raids in convoys of Toyota Landcruisers. They were accused by Iraqis of beating prisoners, torturing them with electric drills and sometimes executing suspects.”

The United Nations special rapporteur on torture, Manfred Nowak, told the BBC television program “Today” that the US government had an obligation to investigate the allegations that the American military handed prisoners over to Iraqi jailers for torture and execution, not only to “bring the perpetrators to justice, but also to provide the victims with adequate remedy and reparation.” Failure to do so, he said, would violate US obligations under international law.

This particular human rights violation is ongoing under the Obama administration, the documents confirm, with a report that the US military this past December received a video showing Iraqi army officers executing a prisoner in Tal Afar, in northern Iraq. According to the US army log, “The footage shows approximately 12 Iraqi army soldiers. Ten IA [Iraqi army] soldiers were talking to one another while two soldiers held the detainee. The detainee had his hands bound... The footage shows the IA soldiers moving the detainee into the street, pushing him to the ground, punching him and shooting him.”

The logs conclude that “no investigation is necessary,” because no US soldiers were involved in the torture and killing. This is a policy formally adopted by the US army in 2004 in a military order known as FRAGO 242.

The *Guardian* notes that the army reports, however grisly, significantly underestimate the death toll from US military action, even compared to the figures produced by Iraq Body Count (IBC), which are well below estimates, based on demographic studies, of a million or more Iraqis killed. The newspaper writes:

“A key example of the failure by US forces to record civilian casualties they have inflicted comes in the two major urban battles against insurgents fought in 2004 in Falluja. Numerous buildings were reduced to rubble by air strikes, tank shells and howitzers, and there were well-attested deaths of hundreds of civilians. IBC has identified between 1,226 and 1,362 such deaths during April and November. But the leaked US internal field reports record no civilian casualties at all.”

Both the *Guardian* and *Der Spiegel* published accounts of the casualties of all kinds inflicted during a single 24-hour period in the fall of 2006, the period of the most intense civil war, when sectarian killings of Sunni and Shiite civilians were at their peak. The *Guardian* chose October 17, 2006, when 146 were killed; *Der Spiegel* examined November 23, 2006, when 318 people died. Each gave the summary the title, “A Day in Hell.” No such material appears in the *New York Times*.

Both the *Guardian* and *Der Spiegel* draw attention to a particularly notorious incident in which an American Apache helicopter gunship trapped two insurgents, who attempted to surrender. When the pilot contacted his base for instructions, he was told by a military lawyer that “they can not surrender to aircraft and are still valid targets.” The two men fled but the copter hunted them down and strafed them, killing them.

In its analysis of the army reports, al Jazeera tabulated all the instances in which American soldiers shot and killed Iraqi civilians at checkpoints along the highways—arriving at a total of 681, many of them women and children. Many of these involved the massacre of entire families, with the worst involving 11 people in a van, including four children.

There is a stark difference between the approach taken by the European and Arab publications and that of the *New York Times*—largely echoed by the rest of the American media. The non-US publications all focus, quite correctly, on the horrific character of the bloodbath caused by the US-led invasion, and the importance of the material for documenting war crimes.

The *Times* seeks to draw attention away from the evidence of US government criminality, combining diversions—suggestions that the documents provide new evidence of the role of Iran in the events in Iraq—and secondary issues—a front-page examination of the role of private contractors—with a filthy smear campaign against

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange. (See “*New York Times* tries character assassination against WikiLeaks founder Assange”)

The American media in general combines vilification of WikiLeaks with efforts to downplay the significance of the material. The coverage in the *Times* and the *Washington Post* starts with the assertion that there is little new information in the army documents—an assessment that would seem to be contradicted by the shrill statements from the Pentagon and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton denouncing the exposé.

Another theme propounded by the American media is that the WikiLeaks material provides an argument for continuing the US military presence in Iraq, because it demonstrates that the Iraqi military and police, under the control of Prime Minister Maliki, is a lawless and criminal force.

Thus the *Post* writes: “But the logs are perhaps most disturbing in their portrayal of the Iraqi government that has taken control of security in the country as US forces withdraw.” And a *Times* article suggests that greater details on Kurdish-Arab conflicts in the north of Iraq could support keeping US forces there as peacekeepers.

Despite the censorship and distortion by the US media, the truth about the criminal nature of the US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is reaching an ever-wider public. All over the world, the US government is regarded as imitating the methods of the Nazis, both in its violence and its systematic and shameless lying.

WikiLeaks has performed an immense public service. It has posted documents that are the raw material for a future war crimes prosecution of US presidents Barack Obama and George W. Bush and all of their top military, intelligence and foreign policy aides.



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