

Further revelations of Australian involvement in Iraq war crimes

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A secret US field report from 2003 shows that Australian special forces “were an integral part of operations” at an illegal “black-site” prison in Iraq, according to the British *Guardian* newspaper.

The *Guardian*’s February 7 article, written by Ian Cobain, reveals that an Australian Special Air Service (SAS) unit, designated “Task Force 64,” as well as a British unit coded “Task Force 14,” were “under US tactical control” and part of the operation of a secret prison known only as H1. The prison was located in the middle of Iraq’s western desert and was not inspected by the International Committee of the Red Cross. Its existence was illegal under international law.

Alongside previous revelations, the facts published by the *Guardian* establish the intimate involvement of Australian military forces in the war crimes associated with the invasion of Iraq.

The existence of the H1 prison only came to light after information surfaced in 2009 of the death in British custody of Tariq Sabri, an Iraqi man captured by Australian forces in April 2003. Initially identified as Tanik Mahmud, he was handed over by the Australians, along with 14 other men, for transport by Chinook helicopter to H1.

After repeated requests by the *Guardian* for an explanation of his death, British officials admitted there were anonymous allegations that “three RAF Regiment personnel on board the helicopter had kicked, punched or otherwise assaulted Mr Mahmud leading to unlawful killing.” He was hastily buried and no autopsy was carried out.

Documents from 2004, recently de-classified by the Australian Acting Chief of Defence Russ Shadars and published by the Public Interest Advocacy Centre (PIAC) in Sydney, revealed that Sabri was one of 64

men captured by the SAS in April 2003. The prisoners were detained by SAS soldiers at a checkpoint west of Ramadi, the largest city in the western Iraqi province of Anbar. The fact that SAS personnel were under the command of US forces operating a secret prison was not known.

It has been previously exposed that Australian troops played a significant—and illegal—role in the invasion in Iraq. SAS troops were deployed into Anbar on March 18, 2003, without any declaration of war on Iraq by the Australian government and more than 24 hours before US President George Bush announced the start of hostilities. The Australian special forces were tasked with destroying Iraqi air defence missiles and capturing high-level regime officials attempting to flee.

On April 16, 2003, an SAS squadron of 150 men seized the al-Assad air base in Anbar, including 50 aircraft. A May 2003 Australian Defence Department statement boasted that SAS troops had also captured 59 people, including members of Saddam Hussein’s ruling Ba’ath Party. What was not made public, however, was the fate of those prisoners. *The Guardian* revelations indicate that at least 15 of them were transferred for *interrogation* at a secret prison.

The Australian complicity in the death of Tariq Sabri adds to the dossier of war crimes for which members of the former Liberal-National coalition government headed by Prime Minister John Howard and the military hierarchy should be prosecuted.

According to international law, Australian soldiers are responsible for ensuring that prisoners they capture do not face mistreatment. In order to evade this legal

requirement, the SAS operated in Iraq alongside a single US military soldier, who was declared to be responsible for capturing all prisoners.

On the basis of this arrangement, the Howard government denied responsibility for war crimes on the grounds that Australian forces could not be held responsible for the fate of prisoners, because they were not a “detaining authority.”

The Labor Party government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard has taken an identical stance. Defence Minister Stephen Smith last week asserted that claims that Australian soldiers were involved at H1 were “baseless.” The Defence Department stated in a press release: “Australia was not the detaining power during operations in Iraq in 2003 [and] therefore was not responsible for the transfer or detention of any detainee.”

The statement was aptly characterised by PIAC chief executive Edward Santow as resting on “legal fiction.”

The Labor government’s refusal to investigate, let alone prosecute, the war crimes of its predecessor stems from the fact it is responsible for no less grievous violations of international law.

In Afghanistan, the Labor government has the SAS and other Australian special forces functioning as hunter-killer squads, killing or capturing alleged insurgent leaders. They have been accused of massacring families during night-time raids. No information has been made public regarding the fate of the people detained by Australian troops, despite widespread accusations that the treatment inflicted on Afghan prisoners is little different from the torture and abuse that took place in Iraq.

The Australian Greens, who prop up the minority Labor government in parliament and have voted for the budgets that fund Australian military involvement in Afghanistan, cynically released a statement on February 9 insisting that the revelations of Australian involvement at H1 “demands an immediate explanation” and calling on the Gillard government to “follow the paper trail and reveal the truth in the

matter.” Having made their perfunctory gesture of concern, the Greens will now bury the issue and continue their collaboration with Labor.

The only social force that will bring to justice those responsible for the monstrous crimes committed by US, British and Australian forces in Iraq is the working class. The flagrant abuses of international law flowed inexorably from the illegal character of the war itself, which was launched on the basis of lies and aimed at securing US geo-strategic dominance in the Middle East and control over the country’s oil wealth. The heads of the Howard government and the Australian military should be prosecuted for their actions.



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