

# British troops given free hand to shoot civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan

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The British Army's rules of engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan allowed troops to shoot unarmed civilians they suspected of keeping them under surveillance.

This resulted in numerous casualties, including children and teenage boys.

An investigation by Ian Cobain, based upon statements by former UK soldiers and published by the *Middle East Eye* (MEE) website, points to war crimes having been committed.

Cobain, who writes for the *Guardian*, has covered six wars, including the 1991 Gulf War and the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. In September 2005, he revealed that the UK was supporting the CIA's illegal extraordinary rendition program. While the MEE was unable to independently verify all the interviewees' accounts, several ex-soldiers serving in different units at different times and in two different theatres of war made broadly similar allegations. In what can only be construed as an admission of guilt, the Ministry of Defence refused to comment.

Cobain interviewed several former British army soldiers who confirmed they were given orders to shoot at civilians suspected of surveilling them. This was sanctioned under the pretext that civilians were suspected of planting roadside bombs, or of acting as spotters or "dickers"—a term used during the conflict in Northern Ireland—for armed fighters.

Soldiers shot civilians without evidence they posed a threat. One soldier stationed in southern Iraq claimed he and fellow troops were told they were allowed to shoot anyone who acted suspiciously. Simply holding a mobile telephone, carrying a shovel, or being on the roof of a building—a normal occurrence in the summer heat—constituted "acting suspiciously" and warranted shooting, mostly carried out at night.

According to military law experts and the 1977

Geneva Conventions, shooting civilians is only lawful if they are participating directly in hostilities. But with no precise definition of "direct participation," civilians are expected to be given the benefit of the doubt. Under UK domestic law, which is applicable to the armed forces, a soldier can use force to defend him/herself and others, including lethal force, only provided that it is reasonable in the circumstances.

This relaxing of the rules of engagement resulted in "a killing spree." One former soldier said he saw a significant number of fatal shootings of civilians in Basra, not all of whom he believed were keeping British troops under surveillance. He claimed that he and his fellow soldiers were promised that they would be protected in the event of any investigation by military police. He told the MEE, "Our commanders, they would tell us: 'We will protect you if any investigation comes. Just say you genuinely thought your life was at risk—those words will protect you'."

Another former soldier, who served in Basra in 2007, said that he "had never seen such lawlessness." He added, "We were shooting old men, young men." They were not expected to ask for permission before opening fire, he said. "Anyone you deem is a terrorist, you shoot them. But how could we know if they were a threat? Not all of them were dickers, some were just holding phones."

A former Royal Marine who served in Helmand province in Afghanistan in 2008 said that although he had to issue verbal warnings to "dickers" before firing warning shots, this routine was not always followed. He cited an incident where his captain had shot an eight-year-old child, "under the impression they were dicking us." The captain acknowledged he had not followed the rules and insisted upon reporting it to his superiors, even though they made it clear that if he said he had

followed the rules of engagement, they would back him up regardless of whether he had or had not done so. “But,” he said, “The boss reported what he had done and was removed from the troop.”

The rules on shooting changed from time to time. One former soldier, who served in Helmand in 2010 with the Parachute Regiment, said that on arrival in the province he was told that he was no longer permitted to shoot civilians thought to be keeping troops under surveillance. “During our first briefing, we were told: ‘We are no longer shooting dickers.’ It was back to winning hearts and minds.”

The soldier said that British troops continued to shoot civilians, and even mounted a cover-up of the killing of two unarmed teenage boys. He and other soldiers had seen two youths approaching on a scooter. “The lieutenant who was in charge ordered that warning shots be fired. We were firing over their heads and then at the ground in front of them, but they just kept coming. They were laughing. I wondered whether they were high.” As they were riding away, a corporal decided to fire his machine gun at them. When the patrol discovered that both boys were unarmed, two Soviet-era weapons—an assault rifle and a machine gun—were taken from the base and placed beside their bodies and photographed.

The UK’s Royal Military Police have been investigating other claims that special forces troops planted weapons on a number of Afghan men who were shot dead during night raids on their homes.

Such was the anger over civilian casualties that they became a frequent source of contention between the coalition commanders and civilian authorities in Iraq and Afghanistan, prompting the US puppet Afghan President Hamid Karzai to speak out. While the US commander General Stanley McChrystal adopted a policy of so-called “courageous restraint,” under which forces were expected to use less firepower, British troops were soon complaining that they were being expected to fight the Taliban “with one hand tied behind our backs.”

Such crimes flow from the thoroughly predatory motives of the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, where there are still 1,000 and 1,400 British troops (fighting ISIS in Iraq and Syria), respectively. The September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington were seized upon as the pretext to take

over these countries to secure domination over one of the world’s most strategic and resource-rich regions.

The murders made public by the *Middle East Eye* are a devastating exposure of the bloody role of British imperialism in Afghanistan and Iraq, whose civilians have alleged numerous incidents of abuse. Along with the hundreds of thousands of documents made public by WikiLeaks, they form the factual basis for a war crimes indictment of the leaders of the British government.

Tony Blair, Jack Straw and Gordon Brown and all the top military and foreign policy officials who served in the Labour governments that approved the wars and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, deserve to face an international war crimes tribunal. Their Conservative counterparts should stand in the dock alongside them.

The response of the British media is significant. None of the mainstream media outlets in Britain have mentioned Cobain’s findings. The only English-language media channels carrying reports were *Al Jazeera* and several Russian and Iranian channels.

The revelations of war crimes are also a warning to workers and youth. Such operations and policies are part of preparations for use at home. As well as deployments to new overseas neo-colonial wars, the armed forces will be used to suppress domestic unrest in the name of combatting the disruption caused by Brexit.



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