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UK covered up war crimes in Afghanistan and Iraq

BBC TV's flagship "Panorama" programme has broadcast interviews and evidence revealing that the Ministry of Defence (MoD) repeatedly covered up war crimes committed by Britain's armed forces during the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq.

"Panorama" cited evidence surrounding the killing by UK troops of innocent and unarmed civilians that could in no way be described as "accidental" or "collateral damage." The International Criminal Court (ICC) said it took the findings very seriously and would "independently assess" the evidence provided by "Panorama."

The ICC has already concluded from a previous review in 2014 that there is credible evidence that British troops committed war crimes in Iraq, particularly surrounding the abuse of detainees, including murders by a soldier from the SAS special forces, as well as deaths in custody, beatings, torture and sexual abuse by members of the Black Watch. It was the first time the ICC had opened an inquiry into a Western state, with almost all ICC indictees being African heads of state or officials, while the United States—not a signatory to the Rome Statute that established the ICC in 2002—and the other imperialist powers get off scot-free.



British Army soldier in Afghanistan [Photo: British Army]

Allegations of mistreatment by British troops emerged in the years after the invasion of Iraq, including videos of soldiers carrying out wanton acts of cruelty. The case of Baha Mousa, a hotel worker in Basra who died after being tortured and beaten by troops while in custody in a British base in 2003, is the most well known. After six years of public campaigning, six soldiers finally appeared before a court martial, before being acquitted of wrongdoing. One soldier pleaded guilty and served just one year in jail. Most of the cases of alleged abuse and torture, which continue to mount, have never even reached a court hearing.

The Iraq Historic Allegations Team (IHAT) was set up to investigate 3,405 war crimes allegedly committed by British troops during the occupation of Iraq between 2003 and 2009. Operation Northmoor, a smaller scale inquiry, received 675 allegations relating to Afghanistan. Both found evidence of widespread abuse and mistreatment at the hands of British forces. This included the killing of unarmed civilians and children.

The corporate media immediately went into action, branding the investigations as “witch-hunts.” Theresa May’s government closed down both investigations in 2017 without any prosecutions, using the excuse that Phil Shiner, a lawyer who had taken more than 1,000 cases to IHAT, had paid fixers in Iraq to find clients. May pledged, “We will never again—in any future conflict—let those activist, left-wing human rights lawyers harangue and harass the bravest of the brave.”

But now the BBC, working with the *Sunday Times*, has uncovered new information about alleged killings in British custody and their coverup. It cited the case, investigated by IHAT, of the shooting of Raid al-Mosawi, an Iraqi policeman, in an alleyway as he left the family home by a British soldier on patrol in Basra in 2003. Within 24 hours, the soldier's commanding officer, Major Christopher Suss-Francksen, citing the evidence of an eyewitness, concluded that the shooting was lawful because the Iraqi police officer had fired first and the soldier had acted in self-defence.

After two years of inquiries that included interviewing 80 British soldiers, including the soldier who had supposedly witnessed the shooting, IHAT stated that the soldier flatly contradicted Suss-Francksen's report. The soldier said he was not an eyewitness but had heard one shot and one shot only, suggesting that al-Mosawi had not fired at all. Other soldiers confirmed this.

The detectives concluded the soldier who shot al-Mosawi should be prosecuted for killing him and that Suss-Francksen should be charged with covering up what happened. No such prosecutions have taken place.

"Panorama" reported one investigator as saying that there had been dozens of allegations concerning the killing of unarmed civilians in Afghanistan, including by UK soldiers. While he conceded that civilians are killed in war, he said, "Yes, there are accidents. But killing in cold blood is not part of normal warfare."

The two media organisations focused on the civilian police investigations—overseen by the MoD—opened after allegations of abuses emerged in civil court proceedings in London, where victims' families were demanding redress. Their interviews with several unnamed former civilian police officers led the BBC and *Sunday Times* to conclude that government ministers and the MoD exerted political pressure to end the investigations to protect Britain's reputation.

The investigators said, "There was more and more pressure coming from the Ministry of Defence to get cases closed as quickly as possible." Another said that what happened was "disgusting" and that the families of victims were not getting justice. He asked, "How can you hold your head up as a British person?" Another said, "The Ministry of Defence had no intention of prosecuting any soldier of whatever rank he was unless it was absolutely necessary, and they couldn't wriggle their way out of it."

The MoD also lodged a series of complaints against the lawyers bringing the civil suits against it. Commenting in the *Sunday Times*, Ken Macdonald, a former director of public

prosecutions, said “it is as though ministers feared the effects of justice.” He added, “All this may come home to roost. Now, as the ICC,” set up to prosecute “where individual nations too cowardly, incompetent or unwilling to bring their own citizens to justice ... turns its eyes towards us, we are forced to confront the unnerving possibility that one of those derelict nations might be our own.”

Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s spokesman dismissed the BBC’s allegations of a coverup by the MoD of the armed forces’ crimes as “untrue,” while the MoD described them as “unsubstantiated.” Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said that “all of the allegations that had evidence have been looked at.” Despite the lack of prosecutions, the government had “got the right balance” in ensuring “spurious claims” were not pursued.

The British generals and the MoD will fight tooth and nail against any attempt to be held to account.

Last May, Penny Mordaunt, defence secretary in May’s government, announced that the Tories would introduce legislation protecting British troops and veterans from investigation over actions on the battlefield abroad after 10 years, except in “exceptional circumstances” to prevent the “repeated or unfair investigations” that had followed operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. This is nothing but a carte blanche for future war crimes, including the mass murder of harmless and unarmed civilians. Freedom from prosecution for soldiers is a key plank in Johnson’s general election manifesto.

The “Panorama” revelations make clear that the rampant abuse by the armed forces was not the result of a few “bad apples.” But the program had nothing to say about the broader implications of the MoD’s coverup of criminality, other than pointing out that it was the soldiers on the ground “who were not trained to maintain law and order,” that were likely to carry the can for the senior staff that gave the orders.

The truth is that the criminality and abuse flow inexorably from the filthy and criminal nature of the operations led by British imperialism over the past decade and must inevitably start from the very top.

The illegal invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq have been based on the slaughter, maiming and terrorising of their populations and the destruction of their infrastructure for the geopolitical interests of the imperialist powers. UK forces, no less than their US counterparts, have played a full and bloody part in these despicable operations.