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Inquiry into “unlawful killings” by UK soldiers in Afghanistan announced

A statutory inquiry investigating allegations of “unlawful killings” by British special forces of scores of unarmed civilians in Afghanistan and a subsequent cover-up is to begin in early 2023.

Commissioned by Defence Secretary Ben Wallace, Defence Minister Andrew Murrison told parliament it will in part “investigate and report on alleged unlawful activity by British Armed Forces” and “the adequacy of subsequent investigations into such allegations” by the Ministry of Defence (MoD).



British soldiers storm a building in Afghanistan, 2007 [Photo by Defence Imagery / Flickr / [CC BY-NC 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)]

The government has made clear the inquiry's aim is to protect the guilty, not to bring them to justice. Wallace said, "While there have been several comprehensive investigations into the events in question, if there are further lessons to learn it is right that we consider those fully, to ensure all allegations are handled appropriately and in equal measure, to ensure our personnel are adequately protected from unnecessary re-investigations."

In a letter to veterans and their families, Veterans' Affairs Minister Johnny Mercer said he was "aware of the impact of this news" on those involved, and "full legal and pastoral support" for anyone called up by the inquiry would be available. In a following tweet, he remained "intensely proud of our service in Afghanistan."

In the Commons, Conservative former minister Sir Edward Leigh warned that the bar for prosecutions must be "very high" otherwise "we are going to inflict a severe blow on the morale of the veterans of our brave armed forces."

Labour's Shadow Defence Secretary John Healey was careful to get priorities in order for "the party of NATO", saying, "Allegations of unlawful killings and cover-ups could not be more serious and this inquiry is essential to protect the reputation of our British special forces, to guarantee the integrity of military investigations and to secure justice for any of those affected."

In October 2001, under the manufactured pretext of retaliation for the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the United States carried out an invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. Cloaked in a spurious mission to destroy Al Qaeda—a creation of the CIA-orchestrated war against Soviet forces in Afghanistan in the 1970s and 1980s--the real objective of the US military was to seize control of a country bordering the oil-rich former Soviet republics of the Caspian basin, China and Iran.

The British military played the leading supporting role. The invasion inaugurated the "war on terror" under which Washington claimed the right to pre-emptively invade any country it perceived as a threat to its global interests as well as to establish "black sites" used for torturing and interrogation. In March 2003, the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq commenced based on lies about "weapons of mass destruction."

The British government and military signed off on all of this in defiance of mass protests by millions in the UK and around the world.

Subsequent regime-change wars were launched under the hypocritical banner of "human rights," in Libya, the country with the largest oil reserves in Africa, and Syria. These wars killed and injured millions of civilians, turned tens of millions more into refugees and destroyed entire societies.

In Afghanistan alone the longest official war involving the US military before its ignominious departure in August 2021—conservative estimates are that at least 175,000 civilians were killed since the 2001 invasion. The true death toll when including deaths caused indirectly by the war, such as disease and cold, are believed closer to a million.

In 2021, it was estimated that 18.4 million people across Afghanistan needed humanitarian relief.

Up to 750,000 US troops were sent into Afghanistan (the number of NATO forces peaked at around 140,000 in 2011) to wage a dirty colonial war characterised by mass murder through air strikes and night raids.

The killing and torturing of detainees, intended to terrorise the population into submission, swelled a growing anti-occupation insurgency until Taliban militias were able to overrun six provincial capitals within the space of barely one week, before ousting the hated and isolated US-backed Kabul regime in August 2021.

UK forces stationed in Afghanistan reached a peak of 10,000 a decade into the occupation and were deployed to the southern Helmand province, between 2006 and 2014, where many of the eventual 457 British fatalities took place. These were predominantly soldiers in their 20s or younger fighting a futile but bloody battle to stop the insurgency spreading to the nearby capital. It was during this period that British special forces were operating and to which the current inquiry will focus.

In July, the BBC screened an episode of its Panorama documentary series titled SAS Death Squads Exposed: A British War Crime? The programme aired interviews and evidence based on official files from police investigations and a four-year probe showing that one Special Air Service (SAS) unit in Helmand province had killed 54 people in suspicious circumstances between 2010 and 2011. The unit's tour of duty resulted in a total Afghan death toll more than double that number. None of the unit's members sustained any injuries in the raids, indicating they had faced no threats to their own safety.

Also revealed was evidence that senior officers were aware of concerns within the SAS but failed to pass on evidence to the military police.

The government denounced the BBC programme for being engaged in "irresponsible, incorrect" journalism. But within 24 hours it was forced to initiate a formal fresh investigation into the allegations, in which the BBC and other organisations were asked to share information, and which led to the recent announcement of a statutory inquiry.

The inquiry was announced by the government a day after the BBC released a follow-up investigation into a night raid on the south western Nimruz province in 2012 in which the SAS killed two young parents and severely injured their infant sons.

The inquiry is tasked with looking specifically at special forces raids known as Deliberate Detention Operations (DDOs) between mid-2010 and mid-2013.

Disclosures required by the court indicate that Afghan men detained on SAS night raids were often separated from their families and shot dead after a hand grenade or rifle was "unexpectedly produced" by the detainee.

The announcement of an independent statutory inquiry—as opposed to the review previously proposed by the government—expands the scope and powers available to the judge leading it.

According to the *Guardian*, "a high court case brought by the law firm Leigh Day on behalf of one man, Saifullah, alleged that his father, two brothers and a cousin were killed during an SAS raid on a compound in southern Afghanistan in February 2011. It was called Objective Tyburn by the SAS, referring to a historic place of execution in London."

Internal SAS correspondence revealed that the morning after the report on the mission that led to the deaths of Saifullah's family members was filed, an SAS sergeant-major described it in an email as "the latest massacre".

In 2014, the Royal Military Police launched Operation Northmoor, an investigation into allegations of over 600 offences by British forces in Afghanistan, including the alleged killing of children by the SAS. It began winding down in 2017 and was terminated in 2019. The MoD said it had not found sufficient evidence any prosecutions.

Court proceedings in July heard that a military police officer wrote that "political pressure" was applied in 2016 to narrow the focus of a military police investigation into allegations of summary killings by SAS soldiers to limit their inquiries to "tactical-level command responsibility".

According to the *Guardian*, "documents cited in court earlier this year revealed there were significant concerns within the Armed Forces that a number of the RMP [Royal Military Police] investigations were flawed."

Britain's ruling elite specialising in protecting the guilty through the mechanism of the "independent public inquiry". Even so, never has such an inquiry begun with such restrictive caveats or such blatant indications of an intended whitewash.

The July proceedings were given impetus by the political objective of accusing Russia of war crimes in Ukraine by a country supposedly in possession of a clean pair of hands. Those in charge of this and previous inquiries are motivated by the sole principles of protecting the "integrity" of the armed forces and the state they defend. They will not condemn as "war criminals" the political and military elite that has inflicted a 30-year cycle of imperialist military violence across the globe.