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Further evidence of UK special forces war crimes in Afghanistan, Libya and Syria

Earlier this month, the ongoing “Independent Inquiry relating to Afghanistan”, which is investigating war crimes committed by UK special forces during the US-led occupation of the country, released material summarising the testimony from seven closed hearings with members of the Special Air Service (SAS)—Britain’s main special forces unit.

As well as evidence of war crimes, the inquiry, which opened October 9, 2023 at the Royal Courts of Justice in London, is also looking into the deletion of evidence relating to these crimes and their whitewashing through internal inquiries.



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 recently released testimony documents, released on January 8, run into the hundreds of pages.

Only the inquiry team and representatives from the Ministry of Defence (MoD) have been allowed to attend the closed hearings, preventing the lawyers for the bereaved families, the general public, and the press from observing the proceedings.

The inquiry is focussing on 54 alleged killings of Afghan civilians (although up to 80 killings, including of children, have since been uncovered) during deliberate detention operations (DDOs) or night raids carried out by UK special forces between 2010 and 2013.

As part of British military support for the US-led invasion and occupation of Afghanistan (2001-2021), the SAS, like the elite special forces of the US and other NATO powers, carried out hundreds of DDOs. Alongside continual airstrikes, they resulted in scores of unlawful killings which were intended to terrorize and pacify the Afghan population as a counter-occupation insurgency developed against the US-puppet regime of Hamid Karzai.

According to the BBC, a former senior UK Special Forces officer (codenamed N2107)—one of several who registered concerns in 2011 that the SAS appeared to be carrying out executions and covering them up—told the ongoing inquiry that the regiment had a “golden pass allowing them to get away with murder”.

The *Independent* said N2107 had access to operational reports on SAS activity in Afghanistan in 2011 and “he began to doubt official accounts of how Afghans had died”, saying he thought that UK special forces had seemed “beyond reproach” in their actions.

In one email from the time, the officer had written that the “SAS” and “murder” were “regular bedfellows”. He also described the regiment’s official descriptions of operational killings as “quite incredible”, while another individual described them as “astonishing”, indicating that they were generally seen as transparent fabrications. One senior officer wrote to a colleague: “If we don’t believe this, then no one else will and when the next WikiLeaks occurs then we will be dragged down with them.”

Pointing to the influence of the successive, brutal wars fought by imperialism in the region, the BBC reported: “Senior special forces officers told the inquiry of deep concerns that the regiment, fresh from aggressive, high-tempo operations in Iraq, was being driven by kill counts—the number of dead they could achieve in each operation”.

A junior officer (N1799) described a conversation in which a member of the SAS (N1201) who had recently returned from Afghanistan told him about a pillow being placed over the head of a victim before they were killed with a pistol.

“I suppose what shocked me most wasn’t the execution of potential members of the Taliban, which was of course wrong and illegal, but it was more the age and the methods and, you know, the details of things like pillows,” said N1799.

When asked by the inquiry counsel if he meant that some of those killed would be as young as 16, and so technically children, the junior officer replied: “Or younger, 100 percent”.

According to the *Guardian*, N1799 told his superiors at the time that he believed the SAS had an unofficial policy in Afghanistan to “kill all males on target whether they posed a threat or not”, and that dead victims were regularly referred to as having been “flat packed”.

Testimony also revealed that the common SAS practice of planting weaponry on or near victims—to suggest they were about to open fire just before being killed—is referred to colloquially as “Mr Wolf”, in apparent reference to a character in the film *Pulp Fiction* who appears to “solve problems”.

In giving evidence of unlawful killings by the SAS, N1799 stated he now feared for his personal safety having broken a recognised “code of silence” within the special forces.

Other evidence provided more detail of known incidents during the occupation of Afghanistan, such as the breakdown in relations between UK forces and “partnering” Afghan forces.

At a meeting in February 2011, partnered Afghan special forces withdrew their support. The BBC wrote, “The meeting followed a growing rift between the SAS and the Afghan special forces over what the Afghans saw as unlawful killings by members of the SAS.

“One Afghan officer present at the meeting was so incensed that he reportedly reached for his pistol.”

In a recently released email, a UK special forces officer described, “I’ve never had such a hostile meeting before—genuine shouting, arm waving and with me staring down a 9mm barrel at one stage—all pretty unpleasant.”

After the intervention of senior members of UK special forces, the Afghan units were placated and agreed to continue working alongside the SAS, but it would not be the last time they withdrew their support in protest. Afghan units who would often suffer the comeback for conduct of UK and other foreign forces—not being separated by garrison walls from the general population—have said that they were treated “like dogs” by their imperial masters.

As the inquiry continues, a wider picture of the British imperialism’s criminality abroad is coming into view.

On January 7, it emerged that four members of the Special Boat Service (SBS)—elite forces in the Royal navy—are under investigation by military police after a car chase in Libya two years ago led to an apparent execution. This is believed to be the first confirmation that British forces are still operating in Libya following UK involvement in the NATO-led invasion of the country in 2011.

It has also recently emerged that nine members of the SAS could face prosecution over alleged war crimes linked to at least two separate incidents in Syria.

In a further telling instance of just how implicated British imperialism is in war crimes, General Sir Gwyn Jenkins, formerly of the Royal Marines, is currently a leading candidate to be the next chief of the defence staff. But he is also facing questions over what he knew about alleged summary executions by British special forces in Afghanistan. It is for the prime minister and the self-confessed leader of the “party of NATO” Sir Keir Starmer to make the final decision.

Just as close as the nexus between the Whitehouse and US special forces, there is a direct connection between the occupant of Number 10 Downing Street and the British SAS. As the *Guardian* recently explained: “SAS and SBS operations are conducted in secret and while the chief of the units, the director of special forces, is part of the military chain of command, they also report directly to the prime minister.”

The crimes of British imperialism are legion. Even their partial uncovering has shocked and angered masses of people. In a perhaps non-coincidental move aimed at softening this response, the heavily promoted second season of the hagiographical SAS *Rogue Heroes* began airing and streaming on the BBC from January 1.

What those wishing to take up a struggle against these murders must be clear on is that no government inquiry or court will deliver justice. That can only come from a mobilisation of the working class against imperialist war and oppression, led by a revolutionary socialist party.

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