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Is the US maintaining death squads and torture militias in Afghanistan?

Glenn Greenwald

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In 2010, as WikiLeaks published hundreds of thousands of classified documents relating to the conduct of the US government, government defenders dismissively claimed that they revealed nothing new. Among the many documents disproving that claim were ones relating to a US policy in Iraq set forth in "Frago 242", which ordered coalition troops not to stop or even investigate torture and other war crimes by the Iraqi forces they were training, but simply to "note" them.

And note them they did: the logs record thousands of cases of Iraqi forces severely beating, brutalizing and torturing Iraqi civilians while US forces, with rare exception, did nothing to stop it (when the documents were released, the Guardian detailed just some of the illustrative cases). As the Atlantic's Marc Ambinder wrote at the time, the documents contain "incredibly awful reports of systematized detainee abuse by Iraqi soldiers and security forces right under the noses of the American-led coalition, which appears to have had virtually no incentive to put a stop to them" (as usual, these documents were classified not to safeguard US national security but rather to conceal bad and embarrassing acts on the part of the US government: that is why it is not hard to understand why the US government is so aggressive about punishing Bradley Manning, WikiLeaks, and other whistleblowers and journalists who expose these secrets).

In Afghanistan on Sunday, President Hamid Karzai alleged that the US is doing something much worse: not merely standing by and watching their trained forces torture and kill, but actively and systematically participating. As the Guardian's Golnar Motevalli reported:

"The Afghan government has ordered US special forces to leave one of Afghanistan's most restive provinces, Maidan Wardak, after receiving reports from local officials claiming that the elite units had been involved in the torture and disappearance of Afghan civilians. . . .

"The provincial governor and other officials from Maidan Wardak presented evidence against US forces at the national security council meeting. The presidential palace later issued a statement saying: 'After a thorough discussion, it became clear that armed individuals named as US special forces stationed in Wardak province engage in harassing, annoying, torturing and even murdering innocent people.

"A recent example in the province is an incident in which nine people were disappeared in an operation by this suspicious force and in a separate incident a student was taken away at night from his home, whose tortured body with throat cut was found two days later under a bridge,' the statement added"

"Aimal Faizi, spokesman for Karzai, said the decision came after of months of reports of abuse.

"People have been complaining about US special forces units torturing people, killing people in that province, and nine individuals were taken from their homes recently and they have just disappeared and no one knows where they have gone,' Faizi said."

Since Sunday, the New York Times' Matthew Rosenberg has written two detailed articles on these events. On Monday, he noted that the Karzai spokesman specifically cited "a raid on a village on 13 February, when American troops and Afghans working with them detained a veterinary student. 'His dead body was found three days later in the area under a bridge," the spokesman said." This morning, Rosenberg noted that the student was actually beheaded.

Motevalli noted that "US military officials have rejected the allegations". Rosenberg also notes that military officials express bewilderment over the allegation that these abuses are being "committed by Afghan irregulars who worked with elite American forces" and that "some Afghan officials believe the suspects are part of a force whose existence has been kept secret by the Americans." And a NATO spokesman said that it was unable to confirm past claims of torture on the part of their Afghan forces.

But there's no question, as Rosenberg notes, that "throughout the war, *the United States military and the CIA have organized and trained clandestine militias. A number still operate, and remain beyond the knowledge or control of the Afghan government.*" Recall that the CIA got caught making payments for years to Karzai's suspected drug-running brother, Ahmed, "for a variety of services, including helping to recruit an Afghan paramilitary force that operates at the CIA's direction in and around the southern city of Kandahar". These are the US-controlled militias, beyond the authority of the Afghan government, on which the US intends to rely if and when it "withdraws" from that country.

It may very well be that US military officials are telling the truth when they claim they are not involved with these specific units, but that the Afghan grievances are completely accurate. That is because, as Rosenberg explains:

"One possibility that would match the descriptions of attackers offered by local Afghan officials and, at the same time, exclude American military forces would be that the suspects were working with the Central Intelligence Agency, whose operatives run militias in a number of provinces. A spokesman for the CIA refused to comment on the issue.

"One senior Afghan official said it was possible: Afghans, he said, make no distinction between military-type outfits. Americans with weapons, high-end gear and facial hair were 'all special forces. It's a phrase that catches all.'"

What is absolutely certain is that what Rosenberg calls the "aggressive tactics" of US special forces have previously "resulted in abuses, and attempted cover-ups" of exactly the type being alleged now.

As but one illustrative example: in 2010, as I wrote at the time, US forces in the Paktia Province, after surrounding a home where a celebration of a new birth was taking place, shot dead two male civilians (government officials) who exited the house in order to inquire why they had been surrounded, and then shot and killed three female relatives (a pregnant mother of ten, a pregnant mother of six, and a teenager). When local villagers loudly complained, the Pentagon lied about what happened, claiming that the dead males were "insurgents" or terrorists; the bodies of the three women had been found by US forces bound and gagged inside the home, and suggested that the women had already been killed by the time the US had arrived, likely the victim of "honor killings" by the Taliban militants killed in the attack. US media outlets, needless to say, mindlessly recited the US government's claims (CNN: "Bodies found gagged, bound after Afghan 'honor killing'"), but the Pentagon was finally forced to admit that its Special Forces had killed the women and then covered-up and lied about what happened.

Whatever is true about these latest human rights abuses, the perception is widespread in Afghanistan that the US is responsible and that the militias it is training are no better than the Taliban. From Rosenberg:

"The action also reflected a deep distrust of international forces that is now widespread in Afghanistan, and the view held by many Afghans, President Hamid Karzai among them, that the coalition shares responsibility with the Taliban for the violence that continues to afflict the country. . . .

"But Afghan officials cited as even more troubling American Special Operations units' use of Afghan proxy forces that are not under the government's control. Afghan civilians and local officials have complained that some irregular forces *have looked little different from Taliban fighters or bandits and behaved little differently.*"

So that's where the US is after almost 12 years of waging war in that country, the longest war in its history. The US is blamed on equal terms with the Taliban, at least. It maintains and supports (if not directs) non-government militias which are perceived, with ample evidence, as being death squads and torture units. Thus do we find, yet again, that the fruits of US humanitarian interventions - liberating the oppressed and bringing freedom and democracy to the world - are little more than replicating the abuses of the tyrannical regime it targeted, just under a different owner. Most amazing of all, the next time a new "Good War" is proposed, none of this will stop large numbers of Americans from believing that both the goals and the likely outcome will be beneficent.