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War logs are no surprise to Afghans

By Nushin Arbabzadah

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The WikiLeaks revelations of casualties are nothing new to Afghans. Photograph: Brennan Linsley/AP

Julian Assange's remarkable service to truth, transparency and democracy are appreciated on the ground in Afghanistan. Yet there was little in the [WikiLeaks revelations](#) that came as a surprise to Afghans and the local media mostly refrained from commenting, limiting their effort to reporting news of the publication of secret files.

Only a few papers tried to take a clear stance in reaction to the story. This silence could be interpreted in different ways. Given that the WikiLeaks revelations primarily compromise Afghanistan's key ally in Washington by showing that the US army has little regard for civilian casualties, the papers might have feared backlash by the Kabul administration and hence refrained from comment to avoid confrontation. Alternatively, the silence might have a mundane explanation: nothing in the published secret files was news to Afghans.

If anything, the WikiLeaks files substantiated Afghan authorities' much-repeated concern that the neighbouring states played a key role in systematically undermining Nato's efforts in Afghanistan.

In the words of presidential spokesman Wahid Omer, "the sheer number of the reports might be surprising, but not so their content". The [spokesman added](#): "There are two issues that appear repeatedly in the secret files and that are a matter of concern to us: the issue of civilian casualties and the role of the Pakistani intelligence ISI in actively undermining stability in Afghanistan."

Echoing his words, the [pro-government Hewad daily](#) said the WikiLeaks revelations substantiated the Afghan authorities' views that the root-causes of terrorism were not Afghan, but lay elsewhere, outside of the country. The paper added that the reports prove President Hamid Karzai right that little has been done to protect Afghan civilians' lives and property.

Among the few papers that commented was the independent daily Hasht-e Sobh. In an editorial entitled "The secrets that were not so secret after all", the paper said: "Despite much international uproar, hype and fuss, there is hardly anything in the reports that we have not yet known about." Islamabad's active and determined support for the Taliban and other terrorist groups that create horrific violence in Afghanistan; the fact that the Taliban have now gained access to advanced weaponry or that the ISI staff attend terrorists' meetings and provide them with logistic, financial and moral support are issues that ordinary people and Afghan authorities have long suspected and known about it. In the words of Hasht-e Sobh: "If anything, Pakistani authorities have hardly tried to conceal all this."

For Afghans, the more pertinent question that arises from the WikiLeaks revelations is the degree in which Kabul's international allies have been aware of Pakistan's involvement in actively undermining Nato's success in Afghanistan. Hasht-e Sobh was sceptical about Washington's innocence: "To assume that by carrying out such secret activities Pakistan has been trying to fool Washington is naive if not downright silly."

But what about the rest of the Nato countries whose troops are currently based in Afghanistan? [In the words](#) of Hasht-e Sobh: "Bearing in mind that throughout the many years of the jihad against the Soviets the international community has been working together and sharing intelligence, and the fact that they had chosen Pakistan to act on

their behalf and fight the Soviets on the ground in Afghanistan, we find it hard to believe that the revelations have taken them fully by surprise."

Like Hasht-e Sobh, the Afghan daily, Khedmatgar, suspected that contrary to all appearances, the publishing of the secret files was in fact approved by Washington and represented an attempt to pressurise Islamabad, forcing it to cut ties to terrorist groups. The paper said that prior to the WikiLeaks revelations, US secretary of state Hillary Clinton had publicly announced that the leaders of al-Qaida and the Haqqani network were hiding in Pakistan. [The paper insinuated](#) that such announcements were a preparation for the subsequent WikiLeaks revelations. In other words, Washington's public denunciation of WikiLeaks was only a cover for a US publicity campaign to morally undermine Pakistan, forcing it to come clean about its game of double standards.

Given that of late the Afghan government and the Afghan people in general have been held singularly responsible for the failure of democracy in Afghanistan, the WikiLeaks reports are both a source of concern and relief for most Afghans. Concern because the reports show that the outcome of the war is likely to be shaped largely by hostile regional powers with little interest in a stable Afghanistan supported by the international community. Relief because the reports show evidently that the idea it is the Afghans' warrior-like nature and their culture of extremism that is solely responsible for the violence doesn't stand scrutiny.

Such cultural-relativism theories were increasingly gaining ground, particularly in leftwing and liberal press in the US and European countries. But as WikiLeaks reports show, the truth is that though Afghan corruption is certainly undermining stability, the financial and logistical support that has led to the killing of foreign troops and disillusionment of the public in the west comes from states who have strategic reasons for turning Nato's mission in Afghanistan into a failure. In other words, even though Afghans play a role in their own misery, the active support for the war comes from elsewhere.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the WikiLeaks revelations is that they show the Afghan conflict is still international in character and the success or failure of Nato's mission is likely to be determined by powers that operate outside of Kabul. Afghanistan has always paid a high price for its strategic geo-political position, and this, too, is old news to Afghans.