

## **Britishness, Brexit and the War on Terror**

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On October 9, 2023, Lord Justice Haddon-Cave opened the Independent Inquiry Relating to Afghanistan, to investigate alleged extrajudicial killings by British Special Forces in Afghanistan and examine accusations of a cover-up. The ongoing Inquiry aims to scrutinise and report any unlawful activities by Special Forces during deliberate detention operations (DDO) in Afghanistan from mid-2010 to mid-2013. It will also review concerns related to reported fatalities, raised within and towards the Special Forces and the Ministry of Defence during this timeframe. The Inquiry extends beyond investigating killings; it should exemplify Britain's commitment to maintaining high standards of conduct, adhering to moral codes and international law. Seven cases were presented, examples of DDO where civilians, including children, were killed, starting with November 30, 2010, when eight men were shot dead, and ending with the killing of a married couple, on August 7, 2012, and the injury of their sleeping children. In other incidents, children as young as 12 lost their lives after being shot inside their homes by SAS soldiers. The judge reminded those present that the UK was a founding signatory of the Geneva Conventions.

A month after the Inquiry opened, it was revealed that one of the UK's most senior generals, Gen Gwyn Jenkins, had knowledge that SAS soldiers had executed handcuffed detainees in Afghanistan. In April 2011, Jenkins, who is now the second most senior officer in the British armed forces, had received accounts of conversations in which members of the SAS described extrajudicial killings. Any evidence he had, he placed in a classified dossier and locked in a safe, where it remained for four years, until a whistleblower informed the Royal Military Police of its existence. Even now, the identities of the officers involved are being withheld by the Ministry of Defence.

It was not the first time UK forces were accused of committing war crimes and of concealing them during the War on Terror, that saw the invasion and occupation of two countries: Afghanistan and Iraq.

The International Criminal Court report on Iraq published in December 2020 revealed acts of torture and other forms of ill-treatment against at least 1071 Iraqi detainees, 319 unlawful killings and rape and/or other forms of sexual violence against 21 male detainees. Serious incidents of abuse in military detention facilities and other locations included sensory deprivation and isolation; sleep deprivation; food and water deprivation; the use of prolonged stress positions; use of the harshing technique; a wide range of physical assault, including beating, burning and electrocution or electric shocks; both direct and implied threats to the health and safety of the detainee and/or friends and family; environmental manipulation, such as exposure to extreme temperatures; forced exertion; cultural and religious humiliation. The same techniques were used in a variety of different facilities, over the whole period that UK Services Personnel were in Iraq, from 2003 to 2008. As in Afghanistan, failures to follow-up on or ensure accountability for ending such practices became a cause of further abuse. Once again, there were considerable reasons to allege that those responsible for the crimes were situated at the highest levels, including all the way up the chain of command of the UK Army, and implicating former Secretaries of State for Defence and Ministers for the Armed Forces Personnel.

The 2020 ICC report asserted that the UK Government was unwilling to investigate and prosecute low-level or high-level perpetrators.

Crimes against Iraqi civilians by the US-UK coalition had actually started on the night of the invasion, 19–20 March 2003. Iraq Body Count's "Dossier of Civilian Casualties in Iraq" 2003–2005 gave the following figures:

- 24,865 civilians were reported killed in the first two years
- Coalition forces killed 37% of civilian victims.

That's 9,180 Iraqi civilians killed by the coalition 2003 – 2005. The coalition went on to kill at least 15,000 Iraqi civilians in the next few years, most of them in the 2014-2018 war against ISIS, including 1,866 children. All those crimes remain unpunished.

In both countries we see the exercise of power, control, exploitation and violence by a complex "benevolent" hegemon. The invader, killer and occupier is the liberating force, the saviour and provider of democracy. In Britain, this humanitarian mask has been made to fit neatly into the popular narrative of British values: the aim is to do good, to do right, to "play fair," and never to hurt – or to only hurt the bad people. After all, we know that the Fundamental British Values are those of democracy, the rule of law, respect, tolerance and liberty. It is others, outside the borders, that are undemocratic, disrespectful and intolerant; those others are the criminals, the violators of human rights, the non-deserving of British hospitality. Not only the Middle Eastern, the Russian, or the Asian, but, eventually, the European too.

The rhetoric of exclusion, the fear of foreigners and the securitisation of migration has dominated 21<sup>st</sup> century British politics, at the same time Britain has been fighting the War on Terror, with increasing demands for intensifying border control to contain the cross-border movement of people. 21<sup>st</sup> century politics of exception have focused on the threat outsiders pose to the British nation. Since 2001, migration has been part of the political framing of the problem of terrorism, whereby people needed to be excluded for security reasons, linking migration, terrorism and otherness. The cross-border movement of foreigners became part of counterterrorism, communicating to the public that danger, crime and insecurity come from foreigners. The British, on the other hand, are tolerant, law-abiding, human rights proponents and, in times of crisis, heroic - a narrative constructed using Britain's past and present. But while the narrative functions to build identity, it also misleadingly and dangerously locates the 'bad' outside state borders.

It was in this climate of ethnocentrism, concealment and state-sponsored patriotic narratives through which to view the world, that the British public voted to leave the European Union. It was the continuation of this same narrative that allowed a Home Secretary to declare that multiculturalism had failed, without having to resign the next day, and continuing to enjoy the support of the British PM.

All nations have their myths of election, myths that foster ethnocentrism and tell members just how special they are. Communities have commonly regarded themselves and their militaries as highly moral and those outside their borders as less worthy, or even as evil, through national myths that are designed to ensure long-term ethnic survival. Such myths are at the heart of modern nationalism. The ideology of nationalism establishes socio-cultural criteria that distinguish members from non-members, and morally elevates the members of the nation above those who are not a part of the ethno-national community. In 'Ethnic election and national destiny', Anthony Smith writes,

nationalism, as an ideological movement that seeks autonomy, unity and identity for a population deemed to be a nation, draws much of its passion, conviction and intensity from the belief in a national mission (...) Modern nationalism can be seen in part as deriving from powerful, external and pre-modern traditions, symbols and myths which are then taken up and recast in the nationalist ideologies of national mission and destiny as these emerge in the crucible of modernization (Smith, 1999: 332).

We pretend that the 'bad' is outside our borders and that it is our mission to keep it away or to actively remove it. Our leaders tell us so, while the army kills in 'inferior' places like Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. But any belief in moral and cultural superiority is based on a well-constructed myth, one that makes us exclude others, violate human rights with impunity, turn away vulnerable people at the border, and accept -even justify- the deaths of thousands, while claiming to stand for respect, tolerance, the rule of law and democratic values.

When we contemplate Britishness, what kind of nation do we really want the British to be? The values of democracy (rooted in equality, pluralism and transparency), the rule of law (which places constraints on our actions and demands justice and accountability), respect and tolerance for each other and of otherness, as well as individual liberty, are all excellent and in keeping with human rights and a sense of common humanity. We can make them truly British.

## References

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