

'A Perpetual Motion Machine Of Killing': Alleged Cover-Up of Civilians Murdered by UK Special Forces in Iraq and Afghanistan

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In-depth Report: [AFGHANISTAN, IRAQ REPORT](#)

On August 1, a rare in-depth investigative [piece](#) appeared on the BBC News website based on credible and serious allegations that UK Special Forces had executed unarmed civilians in Afghanistan. The BBC article was produced in tandem with a [report](#), "'Rogue SAS Afghanistan execution squad" exposed by email trail', published by the Sunday Times.

Special Forces are the UK's elite specialist troops, encompassing both the SAS (Special Air Service) and the SBS (Special Boat Service). The allegation, by two senior officers, is that there was a 'deliberate policy' of British Special Forces illegally killing unarmed men in Afghanistan under the pretext of assassinating Taliban leaders.

The new revelations were based on documents recently released to solicitors Leigh Day as part of an ongoing case at the High Court brought by an Afghan man, Saifullah Ghareb Yar. He says that four members of his family were shot dead in rural Helmand in a 'night raid' in the early hours of 16 February 2011.

The UK government claims that the family members were 'killed in self defence.' But the newly-released documents contradict this assertion. As the BBC article noted:

'Just hours after the elite troops had returned to base, other British soldiers were exchanging emails describing the events of that night as the "latest massacre".'

In other words, this was not the first such case where killings of unarmed civilians by Special Forces had taken place.

Saifullah's family were asleep at 1am when they woke suddenly to the sound of helicopter rotors, followed by shouting through megaphones. Saifullah was a teenager, caught in the middle of a Special Forces 'kill or capture' mission. He told the BBC what happened:

'My whole body was shaking because of the fear. Everyone was frightened. All the women and children were crying and screaming'.

His hands were tied and he was put in a holding area with the women and children.

The BBC report continued:

'He had not been there for long when he heard gunfire.

'After the troops had left, the bodies of his two brothers were discovered in the fields surrounding their home. His cousin had been shot dead in a neighbouring building.

'Going back into his house, Saifullah found his father, lying face down on the ground.

“His head, the forehead area, was shot with many bullets, and his leg was completely broken by the bullets’.”

The official UK Special Forces report on the killings claimed that the British soldiers had been threatened by the Afghan men brandishing weapons. In particular, the official report claimed that after initially securing the compound they went back in to search the rooms with one of the men they had detained. This man, said Special Forces, suddenly reached for a grenade behind a curtain. Their report stated:

'He poses an immediate threat to life and is engaged with aimed shots. The assault team members take cover. The grenade malfunctions and does not detonate'.



Another of the four Afghan men was killed when told to go into another building to open the curtains, said Special Forces. He supposedly emerged with a rifle and was then shot dead.

The official account of the killings, noted the BBC, was 'met with suspicion by some in the British military.' The more detailed [article](#) in the Sunday Times includes the disbelieving response of a senior officer reading the Special Forces' version of events:

'Basically, for what must be the 10th time in the last two weeks, when they sent [an Afghan man] back into the [building], to open the curtains(??) he re-appeared [sic] with an AK [AK-47 assault rifle].'

An internal army message included a summary of the official Special Forces report and concluded by saying: "You couldn't MAKE IT UP!"

However, it appeared as though Special Forces *had* made it up.

The serious allegations in the BBC and Sunday Times articles followed a Panorama programme, [‘War Crimes Scandal Exposed’](#), last November in the wake of the government’s announcement that investigations into alleged war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan would be closed, before a single soldier had even been prosecuted. Panorama worked with the Sunday Times Insight team, revealing ‘evidence of a pattern of illegal killings by UK Special Forces.’

In the programme, BBC reporter Richard Bilton met UK detectives, formerly of the Iraq Historic Allegations Team (IHAT), who spoke for the first time about how they were prevented from prosecuting soldiers suspected of serious crimes. These detectives believe that the Ministry of Defence and senior military officers were involved in the cover-up of torture and illegal killings. This happened in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

IHAT was set up by the Labour government in 2010. But, as Bilton noted for Panorama:

‘Despite years of work, not a single one of the almost 3,400 allegations against British troops [in Iraq] was prosecuted.’

He continued:

‘Then, in 2017, the Conservative government shut IHAT down. The government claimed it was down to the actions of one solicitor. Phil Shiner ran Public Interest Lawyers, a legal firm that brought over a thousand cases to IHAT. He was struck off following allegations he had paid fixers to find clients in Iraq.’

In her speech to the Conservative party conference that autumn, Prime Minister Theresa May, [proclaimed](#) to great applause that:

‘we will never again in any future conflict let those activist left-wing human rights lawyers harangue and harass the bravest of the brave, the men and women of our Armed Forces’.

But, as one former IHAT detective told Panorama:

‘It was helpful to close IHAT down, wasn’t it? [ironic tone]. You don’t need an excuse. All you’re going to say is, “Right, everything’s now tainted. We can bin all that. Yippee.” It was a whitewash. Public Interest Lawyers and Phil Shiner – that was used as an excuse to get rid of a lot of jobs and say: “IHAT, you’re finished”.’

As Bilton observed:

‘Phil Shiner broke the rules. But that doesn’t mean all the allegations made by Iraqi civilians were untrue. The detectives we’ve spoken to say IHAT was shut down for political reasons. It was a cover-up.’

He added:

'IHAT detectives say the government never wanted any soldiers prosecuted, no matter how strong the evidence.'

Meanwhile in Afghanistan, at the same time that the government announced IHAT would be shut down, it also decided to end an investigation, Operation Northmoor, into alleged war crimes in Afghanistan.

Bilton:

'Northmoor's team of detectives had been investigating allegations of executions by British Special Forces. They had linked dozens of suspicious killings on night raids. But Northmoor was closed before they even interviewed key Afghan witnesses.'

He added:

'Some of those killed were undoubtedly members of the Taliban. But the UN has concluded that Coalition forces killed more than 300 innocent civilians.'

This is a shocking statistic. Perhaps the most appalling case Panorama investigated was the brutal killing of four boys in the Helmand village of Loy Bagh in October 2012, shot dead while they were sitting drinking tea. Bilton reported:

'Detectives discovered Special Forces didn't tell the truth about the raid. The first military reports failed to disclose British involvement.'

Instead, they attempted to pin the blame on Afghan forces; a common evasive tactic.

'Detective say UK forces were falsely attributing suspicious deaths to Afghan forces, so British troops wouldn't be investigated.'

The British soldier who shot the four boys later claimed to UK detectives working for IHAT that he shot two of the boys because they were standing and pointing weapons at him, and he shot at the other two 'when they appeared out of the shadows'.

But the evidence of bullet holes low down in the room was inconsistent with his account. The boys had been sitting, just as claimed by Afghan witnesses, not standing.

Such clashes with evidence and testimony from the scene of killings fit a pattern of official accounts of raids written up afterwards by UK Special Forces alleging 'self defence'. Former intelligence officer Frank Ledwidge told Panorama that the night raids were a 'perpetual motion machine of killing and capturing'. Former Operation Northmoor detectives believe the case brought by Saifullah Ghareb Yar (see above) is part of a pattern of cover-ups they were investigating. They allege that the British military and the government have covered up numerous murders by closing down IHAT (in Iraq) and Operation Northmoor (in Afghanistan).

Mark Urban, Defender Of The Faith

The new BBC online [investigative piece](#), published on August 1, together with the [Panorama programme](#) last November, are rare examples of serious public-interest BBC journalism attempting to hold the UK military and government to account. Will other BBC journalists, with responsibility for 'defence' and foreign affairs, pursue the latest revelations regarding the case of four members of Saifullah Ghareb Yar's family being executed in Helmand province?



Consider, in particular, Mark Urban, diplomatic and defence editor for BBC Newsnight, who has spent years reporting on Iraq and Afghanistan, very much from within a propaganda framework aligned with UK government policies and interests. For example, in a 2015 [comment piece](#) in the Evening Standard, Urban was happy to amplify the Cold War narrative spun by former top-ranking UK military officials:

'Speaking to Britain's former top military leadership, you find General Shirreff, or former Chief of the General Staff Gen Sir Peter Wall, arguing that Russia is the principal worry. Lt Gen Sir Graeme Lamb, former Director of Special Forces, or General Lord David Richards (former Chief of the Defence Staff) believe the Islamic State is the real game changer. Talk to some of the US military leaders or intelligence people and they are more worried about China.

'Either way, the ability of countries such as the UK to do something about these emerging threats is limited by the dramatic cuts enacted after the Cold War.'

For Urban, there was no need to insert 'emerging threats' in inverted commas; it was simply a given that China and Russia threaten the UK. The possibility that it could be *the West that is threatening China and Russia* is presumably unthinkable.

As John Pilger writes in a new [piece](#) commemorating the victims of the US atomic bombs dropped on Japan in 1945, intended as a [show of strength](#) to show the Soviet Union who was the world's boss:

'Today, more than 400 American military bases almost encircle China with missiles, bombers, warships and [nuclear weapons](#). From Australia north through the Pacific to South-East Asia, Japan and Korea and across Eurasia to Afghanistan and India, the bases form, as one U.S. strategist told me, "the perfect noose".'

But, as ever for compliant Western propagandists like Urban, the Orwellian framework that 'we' are only 'defending' ourselves is deeply embedded in establishment-friendly

'journalism'.

As we have previously [noted](#), Urban is a former defence correspondent at the Independent. He served in the British Army, both as a regular officer for nine months as well as serving four years in the Territorials. He has hosted a series of virtual reality war games on the BBC, *Time Commanders*, re-enacting key battles. He is also the author of several books:

- Soviet Land Power (1985)
- War in Afghanistan (1987)
- Big Boys' Rules: The SAS and the secret struggle against the IRA (1992)
- UK Eyes Alpha: Inside British Intelligence (1996)
- The Man Who Broke Napoleon's Codes: The Story of George Scovell (2001)
- Rifles: Six Years with Wellington's Legendary Sharpshooters (2003)
- Generals: Ten British Commanders Who Shaped the World (2005)
- Fusiliers: Eight Years with the Redcoats in America (2007)
- Task Force Black: The Explosive True Story of the Secret Special Forces War in Iraq (2010)
- The Tank War: The British Band of Brothers - One Tank Regiment's World War II (2014)
- The Edge: Is The Military Dominance Of The West Coming To An End? (2015)
- The Skripal Files: The Life and Near Death of a Russian Spy (2018)

On August 3, we checked [Urban's Twitter](#) account and noted that he had made only the most cursory reference to the allegations regarding Special Forces in Afghanistan in a [reply](#) to someone called Henry Hyde who had flagged them up to him.

'Yes Henry. It gives a fuller version of allegations previously reported by the paper in relation to a particular squadron of 22 SAS during its tour in Afghan.'

Hyde [replied](#):

'Highly disturbing stuff.'

Urban did not respond further.

We [asked](#) him via Twitter on August 3:

'Hello Mark [@markurban01](#)

You've reported on [#Afghanistan](#) for [@BBCNewsnight](#) over many years.

Why are you not drawing attention to these important allegations of UK Special Forces executing unarmed civilians?'

Urban did not reply. This contrasts with the early years of Media Lens when Urban - as well as other high-profile 'mainstream' journalists - would engage in substantive email exchanges with us. In 2007, for example, we [critiqued](#) his assertion in a BBC report that US troops were 'here to help' in Iraq. This, of course, was the propaganda line that the US and its allies were desperate to sell to the public following the bloodbath of the 2003 invasion

and subsequent occupation.

To his credit back then, Urban [replied](#) to us, although he disparaged our analysis as being:

‘put together by you sitting at home, sifting current events through a dense filter of ideology.’

The implication was, of course, that Urban – as an ‘impartial’ BBC News correspondent – was subject to no ‘filter of ideology’ at all. Long-term readers may recall Andrew Marr’s similar [assertion](#) in the Daily Telegraph back in 2001 that when he joined the BBC as political editor, his ‘Organs of Opinion were formally removed’.

Ironically for Urban, our analysis that had been ‘put together by [us] sitting at home’, was supported in 2007 by a serving British Army officer who had read the exchanges with Urban in our media alerts, and had then [written](#) to him. The anonymous officer said that the view that the war had been ‘illegal, immoral and unwinnable’ was ‘the overwhelming feeling of many of my peers’.

As a result of these exchanges involving Media Lens, the British army officer’s views were [reported](#) on Newsnight; one of the vanishingly rare occasions in which the ‘mainstream’ media have so much as mentioned us. At that time, the Newsnight editor was Peter Barron, with whom Media Lens had had several polite and respectful email exchanges.

We had a further lengthy exchange with Urban in 2009 following this extraordinary claim about anti-war protesters in his BBC [‘War and Peace’ blog](#) that:

‘it was their hand wringing and magnification of every set back or mis-step that played a key role in undermining the political will to achieve more in southern Iraq.’

As we [noted](#) in our reply:

‘You have misunderstood the whole basis of the anti-war protest. The argument is that the invasion was illegal, in fact a classic example of the supreme war crime – the waging of a war of aggression. The Nuremberg trials were clear that it makes not a jot of difference whether such criminality has positive outcomes – the waging of aggressive war is illegal.’

This entirely rational and well-established point, rooted in international justice, was apparently incomprehensible to Urban who replied:

‘Are you comparing British soldiers to Nazis? I cannot see the comparison; either in legal or moral terms.’

This standard ‘mainstream’ resort to ‘moral equivalence’, when the crimes of the West are raised, has been [demolished](#) by Noam Chomsky who once told BBC interviewer Tim Sebastian:

'Moral equivalence is a term of propaganda that was invented to try to prevent us from looking at the acts for which we are responsible... Minimal moral integrity requires that if we think something is wrong when they do it, it's wrong when we do it.'

In late 2009 and early 2010, the Sunday Times published articles by its reporter Jerome Starkey detailing the killing of eight Afghan schoolboys in a night raid by US-led troops. We wrote two media alerts at the time ([here](#) and [here](#)), highlighting how a Nato spokesperson had initially denied that schoolchildren had been shot in the head – several of them after first being handcuffed – and then retracting their cover story. Western authorities later offered relatives 'compensation' of US\$2,000 for each life taken. We noted the dearth of follow-up 'mainstream' interest to Starkey's courageous reporting, including the BBC's failure to report the allegations fully and responsibly.

Without access to all of Newsnight's broadcasts during this period, it is not possible to categorically say whether the programme reported much of this, if anything. As the usual correspondent for reporting from Afghanistan, it would most likely have fallen to Mark Urban to cover it.

Following the latest revelations on August 1 on the killing of four of Saifullah Ghareb Yar's relatives in Helmand (see above), an anodyne [piece](#) by Urban appeared on the BBC News website on August 3, blandly titled, 'Defence Secretary to review SAS Afghanistan emails'. This was later on the same day that we had tweeted him. Arguably, this means he had been too busy to respond; though surely a short reply would have taken him just a few seconds. However, the focus of Urban's piece was not the shocking execution of unarmed civilians, but on how the revelation of secret emails about Special Forces operations in Afghanistan was:

'causing recriminations within the Ministry of Defence, with a process starting this week to re-examine how ministers were kept in ignorance of their content.'

The emphasis of his report was the 'fresh worries' in the Ministry of Defence about the revelations and the stressful impact on army veterans:

'The allegations about D Squadron's tour – each of 22 SAS's sub-units rotated through Afghanistan in turn for 3-4 months – are not new.

'They have already been investigated by the Royal Military Police under Operation Northmoor, a prolonged inquiry that ended without any soldiers being charged.

'Veterans of the regiment have complained about the stress of such prolonged enquiries.'

The piece mentions allegations of 'a deliberate policy... to engage and kill fighting aged men on target even when they did not pose a threat', but was shorn of details of the killing of unarmed civilians. This fits a pattern of Urban's reporting. We have been unable to find anything substantive about the impact of Special Forces' operations on Afghan and Iraqi civilians in his Twitter timeline, his BBC blog, or anything he has published online or in any newspaper. It is almost impossible to give a definitive set of search results with 100 per cent

confidence. But, as an example, if one searches the BBC News website using the search terms “Mark Urban” + “Special Forces” + “civilians” only a handful of results are returned; and nothing of substance in which the emphasis is on civilian victims.

For instance, in a 2011 BBC News website [piece](#) by Urban, titled ‘Impact on special forces of Navy Seals helicopter loss’, there was a token mention in the final paragraph of the occasions when ‘Afghans report civilians being killed’. This encapsulates Urban’s propaganda journalism as a whole: overwhelming weight is given to the priorities of the UK establishment and the military, with only passing mention of the destructive impact of UK policy and actions on the victims.

Admittedly, we have not read Urban’s books in the lengthy list above. But would it be at all likely that his reporting in book form would suddenly shift by one hundred and eighty degrees to focus, not on British armed forces, but on their victims? In a [review](#) of Urban’s book, ‘Task Force Black: The Explosive True Story of the Secret Special Forces War in Iraq’, Observer foreign correspondent Jason Burke noted:

‘Few reporters succeed in cultivating any sources within the closed world of the British special forces; Urban has found dozens who have spoken with unprecedented candour.’



Given Mark Urban’s history of ‘cultivating’ sources within British special forces, and his privileged extensive access to UK military and intelligence agencies, how likely is it that he would not have known about the serious allegations of the execution of innocent civilians going back many years? His unwillingness to seriously explore allegations of this kind is hugely significant.

Burke notes that Urban ‘had to battle with the Ministry of Defence’ to have the book published, but then adds:

‘one wonders what reception a work more critical of British special forces’ operations might have received in Whitehall. The author’s personal admiration for the men who constitute his subject is clear. Language veers from the breathless – “Britain’s hand-picked troops”, the “SAS had got its man”- to the soldierly – firefights are “epic”, problems are “aggro”.’

Would the author’s ‘personal admiration’ for these men be so high if he had investigated and reported the many credible accounts of unarmed civilians being killed by Special Forces, followed by cynical attempts at cover-ups aided, if not directed, by senior figures within the

Ministry of Defence?

Remarkably, in November 2010, almost one year after the killing of eight schoolchildren by Nato-led forces had been reported by the Sunday Times, Urban had [told](#) Newsnight viewers:

'The biggest mistake of the coalition's early years here was under-investment in the Afghan forces.'

It takes a particularly 'dense filter of ideology', to use Urban's own words, to devote scant attention to Western crimes in the killing of schoolchildren, and other unarmed civilians, in Afghanistan and Iraq.

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