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The Iraq Archive: The Strands of a War

A huge trove of secret field reports from the battlegrounds of Iraq sheds new light on the war, including such fraught subjects as civilian deaths, detainee abuse and the involvement of Iran.

The secret archive is the second such cache obtained by the independent organization WikiLeaks and made available to several news organizations. Like the [first release](#), some 77,000 reports covering six years of the war in Afghanistan, the Iraq documents provide no earthshaking revelations, but they offer insight, texture and context from the people actually fighting the war.

A close analysis of the 391,832 [documents](#) helps illuminate several important aspects of this war:

¶ The war in Iraq spawned a reliance on [private contractors](#) on a scale not well recognized at the time and previously unknown in American wars. The documents describe an outsourcing of combat and other duties once performed by soldiers that grew and spread to Afghanistan to the point that there are more contractors there than soldiers.

¶ The documents suggest that the so-called [surge](#) worked not only because the American military committed to more troops and a new strategy but because Iraqis themselves, exhausted by years of bloody war, were ready for it. The conditions, the documents suggest, may not be repeatable in the still intensifying war in Afghanistan.

¶ [The deaths of Iraqi civilians](#) — at the hands mainly of other Iraqis, but also of the American military — appear to be greater than the numbers made public by the United States during the Bush administration.

¶ While the abuse of Iraqi prisoners by Americans, particularly at the Abu Ghraib prison, shocked the American public and much of the world, the documents paint an even more lurid picture of [abuse by America's Iraqi allies](#) — a brutality from which the Americans at times averted their eyes.

¶ Iran's military, more than has been generally understood, [intervened aggressively in support of Shiite combatants](#), offering weapons, training and sanctuary and in a few instances directly engaging American troops.

The Iraqi documents were made available to The Times, the British newspaper The Guardian, the French newspaper Le Monde and the German magazine Der Spiegel on the condition that they be embargoed until now. WikiLeaks has never stated where it obtained the information, although an American Army intelligence analyst, Pfc. [Bradley Manning](#), has been arrested and accused of being a source of classified material.

As it did with the Afghan war logs, The Times has redacted or withheld any documents that would put lives in danger or jeopardize continuing military operations. Names of Iraqi informants, for example, have not been disclosed. WikiLeaks said that it has also employed teams of editors to scrub the material for posting on its Web site.

WikiLeaks has been under strong pressure from the United States and the governments of other countries but is also fraying internally, in part because of a decision to post many of the Afghan documents without removing the names of informants, putting their lives in danger. A profile of WikiLeaks's contentious founder, Julian Assange, [appears here](#).

The New York Times told the Pentagon which specific documents it planned to post and showed how they had been redacted. The Pentagon said it would have preferred that The Times not publish any classified materials but did not propose any cuts. Geoff Morrell, the Defense Department press secretary, strongly condemned both WikiLeaks and the release of the Iraq documents.

“We deplore WikiLeaks for inducing individuals to break the law, leak classified documents and then cavalierly share that secret information with the world, including our enemies,” he said.

“We know terrorist organizations have been mining the leaked Afghan documents for information to use against us and this Iraq leak is more than four times as large. By disclosing such sensitive information, WikiLeaks continues to put at risk the lives of our troops, their coalition partners and those Iraqis and Afghans working with us.”

Read the full [Pentagon response](#) »

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: October 23, 2010

An early version of this article gave an incorrect figure for the number of reports covering the years of war in Afghanistan. The figure is 77,000.