

# The WikiLeaks Iraq War documents: Investigate wrongdoing, or shoot the messenger?

Opinion by Centre Associate, Associate Professor Gideon Boas

Publication on the WikiLeaks website of 391,832 secret US military documents paint a grim picture of the mission in Iraq. The Iraq war and occupation is one which Australia enthusiastically enjoined, despite the lack of a credible intelligence base justifying the attack and despite the lack of a United Nations Security Council resolution that may have served to legitimise what is clearly an illegal use of force and contrary to international law. John Howard's autobiography, released recently, merely serves to further entrench how arrogant, foolish and ill-informed was his apparently unilateral decision to support George W Bush's war in Iraq.

The voluminous WikiLeaks documentation constitutes an extraordinary archive of military reports from US soldiers, each document being a 'SIGACT' (or, Significant Action in the Iraq war), diarising aspects of America's daily operation in Iraq for almost the entire period between January 2004 and December 2010. Clear and credible evidence of torture, killings and a variety of other actions potentially amounting to war crimes, are documented in the reports. In all, some 66,081 civilian deaths are documented over the eight years covered – or, as highlighted by WikiLeaks, an average of 31 civilian deaths per day. This is 15,000 more than officially reported and is probably at any rate a serious underrepresentation of civilian deaths.

WikiLeaks was clever to engage the assistance of some major newspapers in the review of these documents – *Le Monde*, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times* and *Der Spiegel*, as well as the Bureau of Investigative Journalism – guaranteeing journalistic verification and dissemination of the reports. The reporting has been predictably mixed; *Le Monde* openly critical of the US, *The Times* conservative and conspicuously uncritical and *The Guardian* somewhere in the middle.

The revelations contained in the documents have of course been played down by the White House, as largely containing no new or unknown information. Indeed, much of the reports themselves do not reveal anything very surprising. But it is precisely this banality that these deaths represent which is most depressing. The Guardian newspaper has created data maps of the civilian (and other) deaths that emerge from the reports ([www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2010/oct/23/wikileaks-iraq-data-journalism](http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2010/oct/23/wikileaks-iraq-data-journalism)), revealing some interesting patterns. Apart from temporal fluctuations and geographic particularities in civilian deaths,

circumstances in which those deaths have occurred provide some insights. The most striking figure is that almost half of the civilian deaths (32,563) are reported as being caused by murder.

But beyond the statistics are the stories themselves. Among the documents are reports of excessive force, civilian deaths, torture, and an extraordinary use of mercenary forces to undertake combat operations that would normally be undertaken by American troops, raising serious moral and legal questions about the US campaign in Iraq.

The other aspect of the US response to the WikiLeaks revelation is a tried and true formula: the best form of defence is attack. Far from acknowledging any potential wrongdoing or need to investigate and potentially prosecute war crimes, the US response has been to attack WikiLeaks, accuse it of encouraging American service personnel to break the law and protest that the release of these documents may put American and allied lives at risk. No doubt the revelation of sensitive security information has the potential to compromise operational security. However, WikiLeaks has heavily redacted the documents and the US has reportedly itself had a team of 120 working on the documents and no specific concerns have been expressed. One can imagine that reports such as these will raise anger in Iraq and the Middle East generally, and reports from news sources within the region certainly suggest this is the case. But this hardly seems a reasonable basis to suppress release of this information.

The fact is that this war was flawed from the start, both in its motivation and execution. The WikiLeaks reports simply serve to reinforce and evidence a significant aspect of what is wrong with the war. The real question that hangs over the release of these documents is what response it will draw from the US, its allies and more broadly the international community. Have we become desensitised to the intentional and reckless civilian mistreatment and killings by years of Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay and the persistent stories of abuse and disproportionate force that have emerged from Iraq and Afghanistan? Will the US simply reject any wrongdoing evidenced by these reports? Will the international community meekly accept this? The answer to these questions will tell us much about whether the posturing of the US and its allies about war crimes prosecutions in jurisdictions other than their own has any resonance when the finger is pointed at them – in this case, by their own service men and women.