

Premiere in Berlin of a new documentary—*Julian Assange and the Dark Secrets of War*

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A new documentary, *Julian Assange and the Dark Secrets of War*, premiered at the Human Rights Film Festival Berlin (HRFFB) on October 5. The work is co-directed by filmmaker Sarah Mabrouk and Turkish journalist Can Dündar. (*The English-language video version of the 55-minute-long documentary is available on YouTube.*)

In the film, Dündar takes note of similarities between his own treatment as a journalist in Turkey and the persecution of Assange by the British and American governments.

In November 2015, Dündar, at that time editor-in-chief of the daily *Cumhuriyet* newspaper, was sentenced to jail after his paper reported on the “M?T trucks” affair. The story pertained to the discovery in 2014 of weapons believed to be destined for Islamist jihadist forces in Syria in trucks belonging to the Turkish National Intelligence Organization (M?T). In addition to his prison sentence, which was extended following subsequent court cases to two life sentences, Dündar narrowly escaped a murder attempt by a member of a Mafia group linked to the M?T (also shown in the film). Much to the anger of Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Dündar was eventually freed by a high court order and currently lives in exile in Germany.

The film begins with Dündar entering a recreation of the two-by-three metre cell assigned to Assange in Belmarsh high security prison in southeast London. Following his abduction from the Ecuadorian embassy by British police in 2019, Assange was locked away in solitary confinement in his tiny cell for 23 hours a day for a total of five years and three months. Dündar notes that he received better treatment in authoritarian Turkey than Assange did in allegedly “democratic” Britain.

Describing Assange as a “controversial figure” Dündar

decided to concentrate his film on the message rather than the messenger, i.e., “The Iraq War Logs,” the US military reports made public by WikiLeaks. The Logs exposed the killing of 66,081 civilians by US forces as part of the neo-colonial invasion and occupation of Iraq and, in particular, brought to light the infamous video: “Collateral Murder.” The video depicts US soldiers in an Apache helicopter mercilessly gunning down journalists and Iraqi civilians in 2007 in Baghdad during the Iraq war.

Dündar travels to both the US and Iraq to track down one of the two survivors from the deadly attack, Sajad Mutashar, who was a boy of 10 at the time, and Ethan McCord (interviewed by the WSWWS in 2010), the US army soldier who pulled the half-dead boy and his badly injured three-year-old sister from the wreck of the vehicle driven by their father. The children’s father had driven to the scene in order to rescue victims (including two Reuters journalists) of the murderous helicopter onslaught. For his act of mercy, Sajad’s father paid with his life.

The most telling episodes of the film include McCord’s testimony. The Wichita, Kansas native relates that witnessing the savagery of the American military on that day in Iraq changed his life forever. McCord notes that the 30mm rounds fired a thousand times a minute by the Apache helicopter were about the size of his forearm. All that was left of the victims on the ground, pummelled by the shells shot by soldiers in a helicopter flying way above any possible threat, were savagely mutilated and often headless mounds of flesh.

McCord describes the “America First” propaganda after 9/11 that propelled him into the army and induced him to hate all Muslims. The events in Iraq forced him to rethink his beliefs and he came to realise the real and bloody role

played by US imperialism all over the world. Plagued with guilt, McCord relates that he attempted to take his own life and describes how eight traumatised members of his unit did commit suicide.

The documentary concludes with a very moving reconciliation between McCord and the adult Sajad Mutashar, who retains his hatred and contempt for the US troops who destroyed his family but extends his thanks and forgiveness to the American soldier who saved his life.

The footage shot in the US and Iraq is very powerful. At the same time, the film has weaknesses. In an early clip Dündar, in the company of Assange's wife, Stella Moris, and their two children, ascribes his own freedom to the intervention of the US president Joe Biden with the Turkish president.

While quite prepared to verbally acknowledge the right to a free press, in practice Biden, along with all recent US presidents, ensured that Assange remained in jail with his life under threat from the American state.

As the WWSWS wrote in its perspective dealing with Julian Assange's release from prison in June: "Assange's persecution has been a foul campaign of lies and defamation. Four successive presidential administrations, including Bush, Obama, Trump and Biden, sought to silence this courageous journalist."

Another short clip in the documentary features former British Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn who has more recently spoken out in support of Assange's release but remained silent for nearly four years between 2015 and 2019 when, as leader of the Labour Party, he could have intervened with political weight on behalf of Assange.

The period in question corresponded with the foul and slanderous campaign against Assange led by media outlets such as the *Guardian* and *New York Times*. The documentary shown in Berlin features a significant comment in this respect. In 2010, Assange showed the "Collateral Murder" video to Icelandic journalist (and current WikiLeaks editor-in-chief) Kristinn Hrafnsson and commented that when it was released "he [Assange] would be hunted to the ends of the earth."

Hrafnsson reveals that at the time he thought Assange was being overly dramatic, asserting that they "would not dare ... You are working with the biggest media powerhouses in the world ... They cannot do it." Commenting on the utter collapse of support for Assange by these so-called "media powerhouses," Hrafnsson is forced to admit he was wrong in 2010: "Surely, they could and they have."

Following the screening of the documentary October 5, a panel discussion took place involving the co-directors, Mabrouk and Dündar, Hrafnsson, Mutashar, who attended in person, and McCord who took part via video link from Kansas.

A number of important points were made in the discussion. It was pointed out that although the American troops on that day in Iraq had clearly committed war crimes and, following publication of the video, the US military was forced to conduct an internal investigation, none of the soldiers involved was ever brought to trial.

McCord made clear that in fact there could be no prosecutions because the troops "were doing what they were sent there to do." Events similar to what took place in Baghdad on that day occurred every day during the US occupation of Iraq. A single prosecution would have jeopardised the entire US war strategy. For the same reason the US and its allies were absolutely determined to close down Wikileaks and silence Assange.

During the panel session, both Mabrouk and Hrafnsson also made clear there was a direct connection between the atrocities committed by the US in Iraq and the current genocide taking place in Gaza by the US and Israel. In the documentary Hrafnsson had already referred to an "arc from 'Collateral Murder,' to drone warfare, [and the use of] artificial intelligence [to the homicidal Israeli bombing] in Gaza."

Hrafnsson stressed that recent conflicts and wars have involved a growing number of civilian casualties varying between 5 and 10 percent. In Gaza, however, the percentage of civilian deaths is estimated to be 46 percent. In closing Hrafnsson declared that the sole duty of journalists was to tell the truth and that meant acknowledging that a genocide was taking place in Gaza.



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