



Intellectual Tariq Ali speaks out on Assange's case & U.S wars

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Moderator:

I now introduce one of the leading lights of the left. Someone who's been a political activist, writer, journalist, historian, filmmaker and public intellectual. Written more than two dozen books on world history and politics. And seven novels, as well as scripts for the stage and screen. He's also editor of The New Left Review. Tariq Ali.

Tariq Ali (TA):

So the popular refrain these days is that Julian Assange isn't a journalist. The implication here is, that were he a critical journalist we might defend him. Well, the people who are saying this, we know who they are. And let me ask them a question. Did you defend the chief correspondent of Al Jazeera at the beginning of the Iraq war? Who went to cover the war for Al Jazeera and was droned to death by the United States, especially after the head of station of Al Jazeera in Qatar, from where many of the planes were taking off, told the United States publicly and privately: "These are our headquarters. These are our journalists who will be covering the war. Please make sure you don't bomb them by mistake." The very first week of the war, their office was targeted and their chief correspondent was killed. He was a journalist. They have picked up journalists in Afghanistan who were not embedded journalists and expelled them. So we know what they do to journalists. In any case, it doesn't matter a damn whether Julian is officially a journalist or not. He has done more for investigative journalism over the last decades than anyone else apart from Snowden.

Most of the liberal newspapers globally after the end of the Cold War had dismantled their investigative teams. Very few journalists employed as investigative journalists their numbers really cut down. So what would they have done? Where did their biggest scoops come from? From WikiLeaks and from Snowden. And why did these people feel obliged to publish them? Because they knew they were true. They knew that they were the only papers who could do it, that it would increase circulation, it would get them more credibility. And I really say to you today that our campaign would be more successful if the editor of The Guardian and the editor of The New York Times were with Julian in prison.

[Applause]

I'm not saying anyone should be in prison, but Julian and WikiLeaks made the information available. The fact that it went global and was published in all the principal liberal newspapers globally is fantastic. But why is only WikiLeaks and its founder being prosecuted

because they can't dare to put editors in prison. They will if they have to, but they decided not to. They decided effectively to make WikiLeaks the target, and later, as the slander campaign got into motion, as many have said on from this platform today, they began to say it's not a journalistic organization, it's a stateless spy [organization] and a lot of rubbish, which we shouldn't waste our time on.

The question we have to ask is, will they succeed? They may succeed, unfortunately, in extraditing Julian, which is effectively a death sentence. No other way to look on it. The Europeans say we never allow people to be deported if they are facing a death sentence, but the American senators, numerous other state officials have made it no secret that he will never leave prison. So that is effectively a death sentence. He's on death row. He will be on death row if he is extradited. Which is why the cravenness of the British government, the home secretary is so appalling in this particular case.

And why are they so determined to do it? They are determined to do it, as John McDonnell pointed out, is to prevent other people from doing the same thing in the future, but it never works. And I'll tell you why it doesn't work, it doesn't work because when people - honest and straightforward people- including those serving in the intelligence agencies or in the armies actually fighting these imperial wars or in the State Department, as in the case of the Pentagon Papers during the Vietnam War, sees some horrors they feel they cannot keep silent and that you cannot stop by punishing other people. That is an outcome of what you are doing yourself. I mean, these people who go and serve in wars, even the ones who don't speak out, have seen a hell of a lot. They have seen people being tortured. They may have participated in torture, they are told to treat the people whose countries they are occupying, their cultures, their institutions with complete and utter contempt and sometimes a few people crack. They cannot tolerate it anymore. And when this happens. They start to leak this information, hoping it will be published.

And in today's world, not 30 or 40 years ago, in today's world, they cannot be sure, and they shouldn't be sure, that it will be published by the media as it is today. You need alternative networks like WikiLeaks to make sure that the material is looked at, edited or not, and then distributed to whoever wants to publish it.

[Applause]

And you know, the ironic thing is that quite a lot of the material I've read from WikiLeaks and the information they made available, the secret reports sent by U.S. embassies to Washington explaining what was going on in the country, the Americans should actually be grateful cause it shows that quite a lot of their diplomats are actually aware of what is really going on in the country. They just don't want to make it public because in most of these countries they're supporting these governments, appalling governments, but privately they send a report to the State Department or the intelligence agencies saying actually the guy we are supporting and his colleagues, they don't put it quite like that, are a bunch of rogues and crooks and murderers. But we are supporting them, but they have to know that these are the people they are supporting. So they are no illusions. So they should have been pleased that WikiLeaks have published this to show that they are well informed, some of these diplomats.

[Laughter]

I mean, normally people think American diplomats are stupid, but actually quite a few of them are not.

[Laughter]

Hence, as WikiLeaks has shown, so WikiLeaks should get a tiny award for boosting the popularity of a few U.S. diplomats themselves. The thing which we also should say of this meeting, is that WikiLeaks was given the information, as we know, by Chelsea Manning, who was then serving inside the United States Army. And Chelsea Manning is today being victimized for refusing to bear witness against Julian Assange.

[Applause]

And this will carry on happening, that I predict the journalists, the big newspapers might not publish them, but there will be people as long as these wars go on and as long as the United States thinks that the only way it can establish its rule, its hegemony on a global level is by occupying countries is by changing regimes, is by crushing the people. This will go on. People will reveal - there were leaks from the Vietnam War, huge leaks published in the Pentagon Papers. It was a U.S. journalist, who revealed that the Americans were using germ warfare in the Korean War. It was denied the journalist was punished, but it was. No, I'm sorry. It was an Australian journalist who first reported that germ warfare was being used by the United States and in the Korean War.

So these things come out and they won't stop. And the best way to stop them is by stopping to wage war. That's the important thing to understand because....

[Applause]

[Continues] It was the Iraq war that produced WikiLeaks. The lies they told to go to war. The people they killed, even Trump in one of his more lucid tweets said, I'm against this. We should think seriously of pulling our troops out of Afghanistan because lots of our soldiers are being killed. And then he added, "AND we have killed millions of them". Absolutely accurate. And of course, liberal politicians poured scorn on him for coming out and saying these things. Because they tend to mask things, so they're said in a nicer way. But he just said it and it's absolutely true. Even the most conservative figures now show that a million and a half have died in Iraq since the regime change of American occupation. We don't have the complete figures from Afghanistan, but they are in hundreds of thousands that have been killed in Afghanistan together with rape and torture. That the wars in Iraq, the occupation of the Middle East, the war in Afghanistan has now gone on longer than the first and second world wars combined. That is the reality in which we live.

And the reporting is very bad. It has to be said. These wars are badly reported and there's a history there. They were very worried by the Vietnam War because television, radio and the print media in the United States and here and elsewhere tended to send in fairly critical reports. I mean, I can still remember CBS correspondent Morley Safer going with the troops to burn a Vietnamese village, showing the Marines throwing flamethrowers on women, children on fire coming out. And Morley Safer calmly said, "and this is how we're fighting for freedom and democracy in Vietnam". Just like that. And they wanted to stop any critical coverage. So you had embedded journalists going in. You had very restrictive practices being

used to prevent the truth from coming out. And it did! Chelsea Manning did it. WikiLeaks did it. Others in the Arab media began to do it.

And as Nils [Melzer] posed the question, what is being done about it? United Nations commissions, the whole General Assembly is one thing. But actually, the United Nations effectively is governed by the Security Council. So these commissions can say Palestinian human rights have been completely eroded, if not destroyed, that there is torture going on here, there and everywhere, etc. it has no impact really on the powers that run the Security Council. I mean, unless they want to use it, which they haven't as yet, the United Nations essentially has become on most important issues where very good decisions are taken a talk shop. And the United States, as the sole imperial power in this world, has protection against any persecution or prosecution by any international body. Not that these bodies would dare do it. And this is the other thing which we have to challenge, which is the complete disregard of any international norms. It's one rule for your enemy and another rule for yourself. After all, we know what has been happening in Iraq. We know what's going on in Afghanistan. Not a single prosecution by the international court set up by the West. Why? Why? We know the scale of the massacres that took place. We know what happened in Fallujah in Iraq, where they were shooting wounded Iraqi prisoners in the head. Saying that's what you do to dying animals, according to a report in The New York Times. No prosecutions at all by any international body. Why? Because they are supposedly our wars and our wars are good wars - and killing the enemy is part of our patriotic duty. That's why. In any system which is genuinely impartial, a legal system globally, I mean, why wouldn't Bush, Cheney and Tony Blair be facing an international court? Why wouldn't they?

[Applause]

So this is the context in which one has to understand what is happening to WikiLeaks, to Julian Assange and why they are so determined to crush dissent. It's not simply, as has been pointed out in the case of WikiLeaks, it is other journalists [that] are [also] under fire. Don't do it again, they say. Don't do it again. This is what happens. Snowden has to go and live in Putin's Russia for the rest of his life and Julian Assange we will make sure he dies in prison. So if you do it, just see what can happen to you. Not that it's only people like Snowden and Assange, as the United States president said casually using gangster language not so long ago, "we decided to take him out about three months ago but then we waited so we took him out now", referring to a serving general in the army of a sovereign nation [in] Iran.

[Applause]

Who will prosecute them? It's an act of state terrorism openly admitted. They say they have the right to do it. Why do they have the right to do it? "We are the imperial power" and imperial powers can carry out atrocities as the European empires showed over centuries.

We owe Julian Assange our support and support to WikiLeaks to carry on doing it. Publishing, despite the fact that Julian is in prison and we have to do everything we can in Parliament, outside Parliament, in the U.N., wherever, to make this case something, we might not win, but to make this case something that they won't forget, that there is a campaign that people will fight against injustice and chicanery of this sort. And I want to end with a story.

I was in Pakistan till two days ago where lots of young people are being picked up and arrested. For what? Charged with sedition for protesting the arrest of members of parliament who say things that the army doesn't like to hear. Picked up by the security services just yesterday. I got a phone call because I'd been speaking with them and for them. That the chief justice of the Islamabad High Court, a very senior judge, the fourth senior judge in the country, summoned the leading civil servant who is technically in charge of deciding who is arrested and who is not, and asked him five questions in the court. Why did you arrest these people? The guy said, "I was out of town, it was my junior who did it, Sir I I apologize for not being in town".

And the judge said, "We know you and that it wasn't you that carried out it with civilian authority, we know it was the intelligence services of the military that did it. Why did you use a colonial law? Passed in British times and used by the British Empire", the judge asked "to accuse some of these prisoners, young prisoners of sedition. Do you even know what the word means?" The guy couldn't reply. Three or four more questions, and he said instead of arresting young people who are protesting, we should nurture them, teach them that it's right to protest against injustice. And he ordered the immediate release of all the prisoners who had been arrested. Now.

[Applause]

It does happen, and one only expresses the hope that the British judge trying Julian Assange will be the wrong sort of judge for the establishment. We know it isn't. I'm just saying that there are a few judges who are capable of doing that in this country. Hopefully, as the case moves upwards to superior courts, we will find some judges who are prepared just to be decent. We don't want them to be any more than that. Just be decent and stop this extradition from going ahead because it would be a disgrace and a stain not just on the government, but on the entire legal system of this country.

[Applause]

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