

Interview with Jeremy Scahill

— *Written by John Parrot On 29th November 2013*

Jeremy Scahill is the journalist whose new documentary *Dirty Wars* uncovers some of the unpleasant things that the US government and their allies – including the UK – get up to in the name of the War on Terror. The film was four years in the making and is powerful viewing.



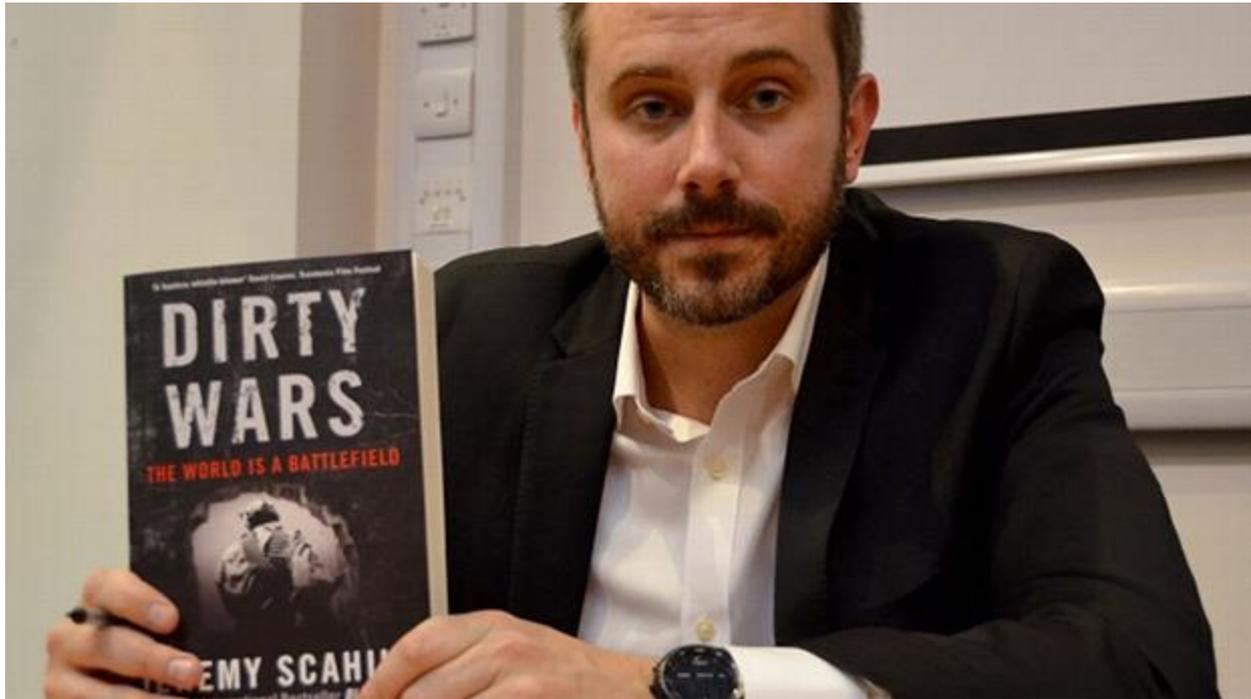
No doubt a thorn in the side of the establishment, Scahill is an extremely dogged reporter whose investigations for this film took him to Afghanistan, Yemen and Somalia, as well as the complacent precincts of Washington DC. Having just flown in from New York where he lives, we met Scahill in the BritDoc offices in London in the middle of a morning he spent being grilled by various journalists. A man of tremendous conviction, he is fast thinking and fast talking; never hesitating or needing to search for the best way to put his point across.

Although we had less than 12 minutes with the man (seconds count when you're talking to someone so full of opinion and insight), it felt like we covered an enormous amount. We could have gone on all morning, but as the interview is so interesting – and important – we thought we'd give you as close as possible to a verbatim transcript.

The Film Review: The nighttime raids, drone attacks and other US military tactics you document in your film seem to kill many innocent people, as well as obviously killing the militants who are the real targets of the US and their allies. Do you think this is military incompetence, a deliberate attempt to instil fear in populations, or possibly even an attempt to kill off the next generation of radicals, as your film suggests at the end?

Jeremy Scahill: Maybe there is perhaps some aspect of this from war planners where there is an attempt to give the impression that if you come anywhere near the people involved in terrorist activities we have absolutely no problem killing you. Even just by just being in the proximate area with them. But I don't think it's some kind of grand conspiracy or that it's been thought through that we want to make everyone terrified. I think there's a degree of that in some areas of Pakistan and Yemen, where anyone killed there is going to be declared a terrorist.

It is more indicative of the massive overreaction that Western governments, particularly the US and British governments, have had over the issue of terrorism. It's not that there isn't a very real threat from terrorism, it's that we're breeding the very threat we aim to be fighting. Part of the US strategy is that politicians believe you can kill your way to victory. So they are engaging in a pre-emptive war, when you engage in a pre-emptive war that means you are going to be killing people that you think have the possibility of being terrorists one day. It's a sort of pre-crime, like in *Minority Report*. So, it's more that they want to take any action to ensure that there won't be another attack and in the process they're killing an enormous number of innocent people, along with a very small number of radicals who are intent on blowing up our airplanes or embassies, or killing tourists from America, Britain or elsewhere.



TFR: In the British press at least, there seems to be a lot more coverage of drone strikes than night raids, which seem to have got swept under the carpet. Now night raids seem to be one of the major sticking points preventing an agreement at the Loya Jirga discussing the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) between the US and Afghan governments, that will decide the future of the US presence in Afghanistan. Hamid Karzai wants them stopped, the US government wants to allow its Special Forces to continue using the tactic in the country.

JS: First of all Hamid Karzai is primarily concerned with his own political future and legacy, so there is a bit of politicking there. But this is one of the premier issues for people throughout Afghanistan. There is almost nothing you could do that would be a more gross violation of cultural norms in Afghanistan than to have a bunch of commandos burst into a home and shoot people, or search them, or grab women and throw them into a room. So, the Afghan government for the past several years has basically been begging the United States to stop doing these night raids, saying 'we want Afghans to take them over'. But the reality is that the US is going to continue to do it beyond a NATO withdrawal. There is going to be a strike force that maintains a presence in Afghanistan. It's not just Americans – British SAS and other British Special Forces have been involved with the night raid policy going back to the early stages of the Iraq war. The force that I write about, and that you see in our film, the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), at the very beginning of its foundation in 1980, the SAS was deeply involved in training and creating the structure for this strike force that ultimately killed Bin Laden and conducts all of these night raids. In Iraq, SAS troops were an entire division of the JSOC-run killing operation and that relationship continues on to this day. You could make a documentary about the role of the SAS in America's global assassination programme and it would be a stunning, because Britain has been doing this a lot longer than America and is deeply responsible for creating this massive hammer that the United States is now using to hit nails around the world.

TFR: The obvious precedent for this is Vietnam and the Phoenix program in particular; one could see these targeted killings and assassinations as a continuation of that. [The Phoenix Program was the US programme of targeting killings and assassinations in Vietnam. Apparently the term 'terminate with extreme prejudice' in *Apocalypse Now* was used by the Phoenix program.]

JS: The Phoenix Program in Vietnam is, I would say, the godfather of these operations. You had mass killing, but it was confined to one nation, with a bleed over into Laos and Cambodia at times. Now you have these operations dispersed around the world. There are sort of mini-Phoenix Programs being run in a variety of countries across the globe.

TFR: Staying with Vietnam, you could say that the armed drones cause far fewer casualties than the USAF's secret bombing campaign of Laos and Cambodia where B52s were responsible for hundreds of thousands of deaths. [The estimated number of deaths in Laos and Cambodia range between 150,000 to 500,000]

JS: I'm not as obsessed with drones as some people, drones are ultimately a weapon at the end of the day. It's a platform. To me the broader issue is the policy that necessitates, or calls for, the use of drones. President Obama and his advisers have really tried to portray what they are doing as a cleaner war, which is why we called our film *Dirty Wars*. It is true on a technical level the blast radius from a Hellfire missile is much smaller than the devastation that a Tomahawk cruise missile could cause or a conventional air raid using a fighter bomber. They try to parse the words and say "Well, we're killing less people here." To me, it's not about body counts, it's the assertion that we can assassinate people in any nation we please. So, yes, that's true, the drone is a more precise weapon than many in the US military arsenal, but to me it's not about "did we kill 100 people or did we kill 70 people?" It's about the policy that drones are a part of.



TFR: I hadn't heard of JSOC before watching your documentary, but since then I've done some research and found there's a [Wikipedia page on it](#).

JS: Now it's all out in the open, but we started doing this in 2009 and at that time the existence of the unit was still classified. We were shooting the film in real time. People say to me now "I've found a website", yes they are on a website now and it is public, but when we started on this none of that was there. The identities of the commanders had never been released. Of course now there is volumes of information about this, but at the time there was not. JSOC has [their own website](#) now. They have a webmaster presumably somewhere and a social media campaign.

TFR: One of the chilling things about your documentary is the intimidation you experienced. The mysterious phone calls, and even when Jay Leno says on his talk show 'Why are you still alive?' How did you carry on despite that?

JS: Anyone who's doing this kind of work – and we see this now particularly with the NSA stories, the Edward Snowden issue, and the recent detention here in Britain of David Miranda, the partner of Glenn Greenwald – you're going to come under investigation and scrutiny. Most journalists who are doing this kind of work are, to some degree or other, under some form of surveillance. Most often I think it comes in the form of monitoring our metadata to see who we're talking to, they want to go after government whistleblowers. It's not so much that they want to go after the individual journalists, they want to figure out who are you talking to, so they can go and arrest them.

Also, there are 30 or so journalists missing in [Syria](#). Journalists get [murdered every week in Mexico](#) by narco-cartels, record numbers of journalists have been killed in the past three years in [Somalia](#). The risks I take – I live in a nice neighbourhood in New York and I [just visit] these countries – if I don't get shot and killed. Most of my colleagues that do this work, the war zone is their home. At the end of the day, if you're receiving threats and intimidation from governments or powerful individuals you have pretty much two choices: You can either become paralysed by that fear, and become a lawyer or teacher or something, or you can say "I'm going to steel myself and not let them get to me", and that's what we try to do.

TFR: I suppose one example, or possible example, of this is [Michael Hastings](#), your friend. Do you think [his death was suspicious](#)?

JS: What is suspicious is the way that it's been investigated, or not investigated. Any time a high profile who is doing the sort of work that Michael was doing, going up against incredibly powerful institutions, dies in a crash where there doesn't seem to be any scientific explanation for it that's been revealed, there should be an investigation. I'm not operating from the assumption that someone murdered Michael, but I'm operating from the conclusion that the Los Angeles Police Department and the other authorities involved with investigating this are not being transparent about it. Sometimes they say the cover-up is worse than the crime, and Michael's dead, we can't bring him back, but my God, explain to us how that happened. How does a blow up in that manner.

I've [watched that video](#) a hundred times, how does a car blow up in that manner.

I will say that I was with Michael about a week before he died, I was actually on Jay Leno's show in Los Angeles – when he said that to me in the movie – and I met up with Michael afterwards and we stayed up very late talking. Michael was talking about a property he was going to buy in Vermont with his wife, he was talking about stories he was working on. People have tried to imply that Michael committed suicide. Very strange long term

planning then for a guy who is about to go and kill himself. It's an incredible loss. Michael Hastings was a real heroic journalist and I couldn't believe it. I didn't believe it when I got the call saying he was dead." Chilling indeed. Thankfully, Jeremy Scahill is still with us and doing fantastic work. He recently [told The Independent](#) that his next project is building an alternative news network that is being funded by billionaire eBay founder Pierre Omidyar. This at least will keep him away from bombs, bullets and Hellfire missiles. Meanwhile, previously uninvolved villagers in Yemen (and elsewhere) are [trooping off to join Al Qaeda](#) after US drones kill innocents in their village.

Dirty Wars is released in the UK on Friday 29 November, 2013.