

Journalists' organizations demand inquiry

US bombs Al-Jazeera center in Baghdad

By Henry Michaels
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Journalists' organizations have demanded investigations into two incidents in which US military forces killed three journalists in Baghdad on April 8, including Al-Jazeera correspondent Tariq Ayoub, and seriously wounded several others. The attacks came amid broadcasts showing some of the mounting slaughter being conducted by US troops throughout the Iraqi capital.

Ayoub, a 34-year-old Palestinian Jordanian, was killed in a direct missile strike on Al-Jazeera's Baghdad offices. Surviving Al-Jazeera staff sought shelter in the nearby offices of rival satellite station Abu Dhabi TV, which then also came under US attack.

At one point, Abu Dhabi TV correspondent Shaker Hamed issued an emergency on-air call for help, saying "Twenty-five journalists and technicians belonging to Abu Dhabi television and Qatari satellite television channel Al-Jazeera are surrounded in the offices of Abu Dhabi TV in Baghdad."

Hamed called on the International Committee of the Red Cross, the International Organization of Journalists, Reporters Sans Frontieres and the Arab Journalists Union "to intervene quickly to pull us out of this zone where missiles and shells are striking in an unbelievable way."

Shortly after the Al-Jazeera strike, two cameramen died when a US tank fired on Baghdad's Palestine Hotel, which houses more than 200 international correspondents—nearly all of the "non-embedded" journalists left in the besieged city. The victims were Reuters cameraman Taras Protsyuk, 35, a Ukrainian national, and Jose Couso, 37, who worked for the private Spanish television station Telecinco. Another three members of the media were injured.

The strike on Al-Jazeera's broadcasting facilities was undoubtedly deliberate. Al-Jazeera had written to US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld on February 23 giving the precise location of its office so as to avoid being targeted.

Both Ayoub and a cameraman, Zuheir Iraqi, who was wounded with shrapnel to his neck, were standing on the station's roof in preparation for a live broadcast when the missiles hit the building, leaving Al-Jazeera's bureau in ruins.

BBC reporter Rageh Omaar, who is stationed in the nearby Palestine Hotel, described the bombing as "suspect." He said, "We were watching and filming the bombardment and it's quite clearly a direct strike on the Al-Jazeera office. This was not just a stray round. It just seemed too specific."

There were no military sites nearby. Al-Jazeera's Amman correspondent, Yasser Abu Hilalah, insisted that the attack was deliberate. "Al-Jazeera's office is located in a residential area and there is no way that the attack was a mistake," he said.

One of Al-Jazeera's surviving Baghdad correspondents, Majed Abdel Hadi, called the US missile strike a crime and pointed to its motives. "We were targeted because the Americans don't want the world to see the crimes they are committing against the Iraqi people."

He noted other US military attacks on Al-Jazeera offices and

personnel—in Kabul, Afghanistan, where Al-Jazeera's facilities were destroyed by an American missile during the opening days of the US-led invasion of 2001, and in Basra last week, when the hotel where Al-Jazeera correspondents were staying was hit by four bombs that failed to explode.

The day before the missile strike, US forces fired on vehicles of both Al-Jazeera and Abu Dhabi TV. Abu Dhabi Television said one of its vehicles carrying a crew came under fire while returning from a press briefing by Iraqi Minister of Information Mohammed Saeed Al Sahhaf. None of the journalists were wounded.

Al-Jazeera said its car was bearing the Al-Jazeera insignia when it "came under fire on a highway outside Baghdad." The driver reported the firing came from US forces. Later, Al-Jazeera reported that four members of its crew in Basra, the only journalists inside the city, came under gunfire from British tanks on 29 March as they were filming distribution of food by Iraqi government officials. One of the station's cameramen, Akil Abdel Reda, went missing and was later found to have been held for 12 hours by US troops.

Since the Iraq war began, Al-Jazeera has won a growing international audience, despite being branded a tool of Iraqi propaganda by US and British officials and, ironically, having the Iraqi government suspend its broadcasting rights.

Al-Jazeera's subscriptions have doubled in Europe, swelling its 35 million subscriber base. Even though frequently knocked offline by right-wing hackers, Al-Jazeera's web site became the most sought-after on the Internet last week.

Al-Jazeera drew intense viewer interest after it carried Iraqi TV footage of dead and captive US soldiers in Iraq, footage that US television networks refused to air. Although Al-Jazeera later honored a US government request to stop showing the footage until families could be notified, its broadcasts triggered vehement denunciations from Washington and London.

In recent weeks, Al-Jazeera has come under sustained financial and political pressure from supporters of the US war. Its reporters were banned from the floor of the New York Stock Exchange and the Nasdaq stock market.

Al-Jazeera has earned the particular wrath of the US and British governments, but they are determined to stifle any independent reporting of the atrocities in Baghdad and elsewhere. In the main, they have had precious little to complain of. With a few honorable exceptions, Western reporters have uncritically adhered to the US-British line, presenting the invasion as an act of liberation and glossing over the mounting Iraqi casualty toll, both military and civilian.

With the massacres now taking place in the capital, it has become more difficult for the true character of the onslaught to be whitewashed. Even a notoriously right-wing columnist Rosie DiManno of the *Toronto Star* reported on April 8 that she had seen American troops shoot an Iraqi soldier who appeared to be surrendering.

The Pentagon denied it had deliberately targeted Al-Jazeera's offices,

insisting they were located in a “target-rich environment.” US State Department spokesman Nabil Khoury told the network: “I personally cannot imagine that a country which respects general freedoms can target media establishments.”

But US Central Command in Qatar, while saying it was investigating reports of Ayoub’s death, issued a thinly veiled threat. “Central Command has repeatedly warned media representatives that Baghdad would be a dangerous place to be if the coalition engaged the Iraqi regime in combat.”

The US strike on the Palestine Hotel damaged the 14th to 17th floors. Apart from Reuters, which has its offices on the 15th floor, Dubai’s Al-Arabiya television channel said its bureau on the 17th floor suffered damage. The US shell knocked a hole in the hotel façade, blew out windows and shook the entire building, sending scores of media workers scurrying into the courtyard in fear for their lives.

The Pentagon claimed that the tank was firing at Iraqi snipers who were using the hotel to target US forces. But the BBC’s Paul Wood said: “We didn’t hear or see any outgoing fire whatsoever. It’s been said it’s a sniper. Snipers will wait for an explosion to fire to conceal their position. We can’t say for certain, but we’re not aware of this hotel being used by the Iraqis to target the Americans.”

Sky News’s correspondent at the hotel, David Chater, said he had seen an American tank on a bridge over the river with its barrel pointed directly at the building just before the explosion. “They knew we were there ... there was absolutely no mistake,” Chater said of the US forces. “I never heard a single shot coming from any of the area around here, certainly not from the hotel. That tank shell, if it was indeed an American tank shell, was aimed directly at this hotel and directly at journalists. This wasn’t an accident, it seems to be a very accurate shot.”

France 3 TV footage showed US tanks deliberately firing at the hotel. “They (US tanks) headed there, moved their turrets and waited at least two minutes before opening fire,” said Herve de Ploeg, the journalist who filmed the attack. “I did not hear any shots in the direction of the tank, which was stationed at the west entrance of the Al-Jumhuriya (Republic) bridge, 600 meters northwest of the hotel.

“It had been very quiet for a moment. There was no shooting at all. Then I saw the turret turning in our direction and the carriage lifting. It faced the target. It was not a case of instinctive firing.... I’m very specific because I was due to go on air.”

Other journalists in the hotel expressed shock and alarm for their future safety. Reuters Editor-in-Chief Geert Linnebank said: “The incident ... raises questions about the judgment of the advancing US troops, who have known all along that this hotel is the main base for almost all foreign journalists in Baghdad.”

US troops crossing bridges over the River Tigris in the heart of the capital said they came under fire from small arms and rocket-propelled grenades from the vicinity of the hotel. General Buford Blount, commander of the US Third Infantry Division, told Reuters that one tank shell had been fired in response. Soon after the hotel was hit, the US military agreed not to fire on the building.

In Qatar, US Central Command spokesman Brigadier General Vincent Brooks blamed Saddam Hussein, asserting that the Iraqi regime was using the Palestine Hotel for “other regime purposes.” Journalists at the hotel disputed his claim however, insisting that they would be aware of any such activities.

Journalists around the world, and some governments, have denounced the killing of the three media members. Dozens of Palestinian journalists rallied in the West Bank cities of Nablus and Bethlehem to protest. The Union of Palestinian journalists condemned the attack on Al-Jazeera’s offices as a “premeditated act, which represents a war crime and a flagrant violation of international laws and conventions.” It was “the same barbaric method as the one used by Israeli forces against

journalists” in the occupied territories, the union said.

Jordanian journalists staged a sit-in outside the Jordan Press Association in Amman, calling for an end to the “massacres of journalists and civilians” in Iraq. The association issued a statement after an emergency meeting of its members, condemning the killing of Ayoub and accusing the US of “targeting the media as part of an effort to block media coverage of the crimes, massacres and barbaric destruction these forces are committing.”

The Moroccan National Press Union declared that US troops had “knowingly targeted journalists.” Secretary-General Younes Moujahid said: “The aim is to terrorize journalists. The killings continue and could get worse.” He accused the US military of including “lies in all its statements ... since the start of the war,” adding: “The Americans want journalists’ work to serve their military strategy.”

The Arab Journalists Union accused US and British forces of “looking to prevent the press from carrying out its duties.” The International Federation of Journalists said there was “no doubt at all that these attacks could be targeting journalists.” Aidan White, head of the Brussels-based organization, added, “If so, they are grave and serious violations of international law.”

Italian press federation head Paolo Serventi Longhi said the security situation for journalists was “completely out of control” and urged the Italian government to intervene with the United States and Britain to stop the bombing of sites where journalists were staying. In Germany, the independent press union sent a protest message to the US embassy in Berlin, while Russian press freedom activists demanded that those responsible be brought to justice.

The president of the European Union said the EU would urge the United States to keep journalists out of the firing line. Spain—one of whose citizens died—said it would seek an official explanation from Washington.

Reporters Without Borders has demanded investigations into the deaths, as well as that of British ITV journalist Terry Lloyd, who was killed near Basra, apparently by US fire, on March 22. Lloyd, one of the few non-embedded journalists who managed to enter Iraq in the early days of the war, was heading toward Basra, which coalition commanders had falsely reported was under their control.

Daniel Demoustier, the French cameraman injured in the same attack that killed Lloyd, this week accused US troops of firing on their media vehicles to “wipe out troublesome witnesses.” In an interview, he said American forces had continued to fire shells on the vehicles even after Lloyd had been killed.

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