

## Reporting Iraq: Liberation's Limits

"accidental" deaths of independent journalists

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The Geneva Conventions afford special protections to journalists in war zones, legally entitling them to greater autonomy than other civilian non-combatants. In particular, they can only be detained "for imperative reasons of security". If held, they must be given the same legal protection as a prisoner of war. The Pentagon seemingly does not have a copy of the Conventions to hand. A week before the invasion of Iraq, veteran BBC correspondent Kate Adie, in an astonishing interview with Irish television, revealed that the Pentagon had intimated that it would target the satellite transmission uplinks of journalists not embedded with the military. They would be, "targeted down... who cares... they've been warned," a spokesman was quoted as remarking.

Veteran ITV News correspondent Terry Lloyd, the invasion's first journalist casualty, had just celebrated 20 years with the network when he was fired on by US marines near Al-Zubayr in southern Iraq, 22 March 2003, according to a subsequent investigation by the Wall Street Journal. Reports are confusing, but US troops were quoted as recalling firing on a car marked "TV". Belgian cameraman Fred Nerac and Lebanese translator Hussein Othman travelling with Lloyd disappeared and cameraman Daniel Demoustier, also Belgian, was injured but survived and said he saw nothing of what happened. Lloyd's body was subsequently found in a Basra hospital. Nerac's wife approached then US Secretary of State Colin Powell at a NATO press conference. Powell promised to do all that he could to find the missing men, as did the British Ministry of Defence. Three years on, nothing is much clearer.

A litany of correspondents' accidental deaths from missiles, mines, explosives during the invasion are, with other civilians, testimony to war's brutality; failing miracles, a terrible inevitability. However, even before the obscene statue toppling of 9 April 2003, the US had some tragic close encounters with independent news gatherers. Tareq Ayoub was working for Qatar-based Al-Jazeera television and was killed 8 April when a US missile hit his Baghdad bureau; cameraman Zouhair Nadhim was injured. As with their bureau in Afghanistan, bombed November 2001, the exact co-ordinates of their building had (24 February 2003) been trustingly sent to the Pentagon and acknowledged by State Department official Nabeel Khoury. Maher Abdullah, the station's producer said a US plane flew so low over the clearly marked building that he thought it was going to crash into it. Then the missile struck. Another US plane, he said, flew equally low 15 minutes later, dropping a missile about 15 metres away which blew the building's door off its hinges.

Moments later, nearby Abu Dhabi TV — their building also distinctively marked — came under machinegun fire from a tank little more than yards away. Al-Jazeera was accused by US spokespeople of having links to Al-Qaeda. Chillingly, Al-Jazeera correspondent, Sudanese Sami Muhieddin Al-Haj has been held in Guantanamo since 2001. His lawyer, renowned

human rights attorney Clive Stafford Smith, says he is in “pitiful” conditions, has suffered “horrendous physical, sexual and religious persecution,” and was pressured to say Al-Jazeera is connected to Al-Qaeda in exchange for US citizenship. He is charged with “trying to go to Afghanistan”, says Stafford Smith, which of course he was, in line of business, with a legitimate visa.

In another incident 8 April 2003, Jose Couso, cameraman for Spanish television Telenco, and Taras Protsyuk, Ukrainian cameraman for Reuters, were killed when a US tank fired on the Palestine Hotel. Major General Buford Blount, commanding the US Army’s third Infantry Division said it was a “proportionate response” to small arms fire from the hotel. The 200-odd journalists staying there said there was no fire from the hotel while the unit that fired were reported as saying they were unaware they were firing at the Palestine — at the time probably the most pictured hotel on earth, with a memorably unusual design.

US soldiers also killed Mazen Dana, veteran conflict cameraman for Reuters, 17 August 2003, whilst he was filming outside Abu Ghraib prison, west of Baghdad. US military officials said the soldiers who had fired at him mistook his camera for an RPG. Dana, according to his soundman, Nael Shyioukhi, had obtained credentials from the US military on Baghdad, identified himself to the US military, even asking if they had a spokesperson available to speak on camera. Other reporters were also there, and Dana’s request to film from a nearby bridge was granted by the military. Experts who train war correspondents said a camera from the distance Dana was (50 to 100 metres) could not be mistaken for an RPG. Dana had reportedly telephoned his brother the night before saying he had discovered and filmed a pit of dead people wrapped in clear heavy plastic, ready it seemed to be filled over. He had linked the finding to the US military. The results of the US investigation into his death have not been made public. US Central Command told the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) it was “regrettable”.

When those with foreign passports, hidden agendas, private militias and armies rolled in to Iraq and “came to power on a CIA train”, according to a spokesman for Ahmed Chalabi’s Iraqi National Congress, assessing factions in a complex society became near impossible, even for Iraqis. It is a “new Iraq” indeed. Whilst press freedom was curtailed under Saddam Hussein’s regime, Western journalists often filing uncomplimentary stories from Jordan, journalists largely stayed alive. According to the CPJ, 60 journalists have been killed March 2003 to September 2005; 37 have been Iraqi. In context, the next most dangerous place for journalists has been Columbia, where 28 died between 1996 and 2006.

Further, on 29 January 2004, the US-appointed Interim Governing Council (IGC) barred Al-Jazeera from covering their press conferences. Two days earlier the station had aired a programme alleging Israeli infiltration into Iraq, and alleging a secret visit by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon the previous December. The small circulation Shia Al-Hawza newspaper was closed down March 2004; US troops sealed the building after the paper alleged that the invasion was a war on Islam and was not about democracy but rather oil. It also claimed that a cited “car bomb” had been a US missile. Press freedom in Iraq, many were saying, was as mythical as under Saddam.

Whilst foreign correspondents killed, kidnapped and disappeared in Iraq makes world headlines, their Arab and Iraqi colleagues are largely forgotten. What is remarkable is how many have been killed, allegedly, by a seemingly unaccountable US military. Assad Khadim Ali and his driver Hussein Saleh of (US funded) Al-Iraqiya TV were confirmed by Brigadier

General Mark Kimmitt as being killed by US forces in the ancient city of Samara; Duraid Isa Mohamed of CNN and his driver Yasser Khatab on 27 April 2004; Rashid Hamid Wali of Al-Jazeera killed by a single expert gunshot to the head, filming US troops fighting in Karbala 21 May 2004. Iraqi cameraman Mahmoud Abbas, working for German TV, and friend and colleague, Isam Al-Shumari, also with Germany's N24 network, were killed and disappeared, respectively, after filming US "bombardments" of homes in Falluja.

One week after the IGC banned Al-Jazeera from Iraq, in September 2004, Mazan Al-Tumeizi, reporter for Al-Arabiya was killed on air, in Baghdad's Haifa Street. Hit by undisputed US fire, he doubled over, crying: "I'm dying, I'm dying." US military accounts differ; one being that they had fired on a disabled Bradley fighting vehicle, to "prevent it being looted". Seif Fouad of Reuters and Shaith Ahad of Getty Images were hospitalised.

2005 was an equally woeful year for Iraqi and other Arab journalists, increasingly in demand by Western media in a country too dangerous now for foreigners to move around. Iraqis, suffering rising costs and stratospheric inflation, need hard currency and take heart-wrenching risks to earn it. Anne Cooper, CPJ's executive director, comments that apart from killings, seven cases of detentions by US forces and "numerous" other reports of incidents have been filed with CPJ. They involve reporters working with CBS, AP, AFP, and others. "But because of military secrecy we are unable to confirm [or move further]."

Perhaps one journalist represents all in 2005-6. Salam Al-Jabouri, a young reporter and translator, was working with British freelancer Phil Sands last December. In June, he was a juror at the World Tribunal on Iraq (WTI) in Istanbul, judging occupation atrocities. In December, he offered the opening hearing of the WTI, The Brussels Tribunal, an article on Iraq's secret prisons. They were, he wrote, run under US auspices by Iranian militia in Medain, Kut, Baladiyat and Hilla (Babylon). Al-Jabouri's friend Majid, 27, with three brothers and an uncle had been arrested and taken to one in October 2005. Blindfolded, hit with sticks and pipes; Al-Jabouri recorded their plight. One brother, Hamed, was made to carry bodies of people who had died under torture to trucks, driven away, Hamed speculated, to be thrown into the river, or dumped in deserted areas. The ground he was toiling through, said Al-Jabouri's friend, was blood covered. "They are a shame on Islam; not Muslim," he wrote of the torturers.

Brussels Tribunal member, Dirk Adriaenssens, advised that Al-Jabouri did not put his full name on the article. Al-Jabouri wanted to stand by it and insisted. He had told Adriaenssens, during the Istanbul hearings, of the loss of his father in 2000. "I'll be your father," said Adriaenssens, "and after that he always called me 'dad.' Perhaps he should have listened to his dad's advice." Kidnapped with Sands and their driver Abdullah on Christmas Eve, they were apparently stumbled on by the US military during a sweep of the area on New Year's Eve. Sands, reports confirm, was flown to Dubai, interrogated for a week by British officers, then returned to the UK. Al-Jabouri and Abdullah were held, seemingly sent to the US prison at Camp Bucca near Basra and subsequently transferred to the notorious Abu Ghraib. Held without charge, Al-Jabouri was released after just under six weeks, on 12 February. No further details are yet known. Driver Abdullah has become the face of Iraq's numberless "liberated" disappeared, his fate unknown.

Last November, Kevin Maguire, associate editor of the UK's Daily Mirror and an astute, streetwise Middle East watcher, claimed that President Bush had been narrowly dissuaded by British Prime Minister Tony Blair from bombing Al-Jazeera's headquarters in Qatar. The British government dismissed Bush's alleged suggestion as "humorous". Al-Jazeera has

demanded the relevant memo; no one has sued The Mirror. In the new world order — particularly the “new Iraq” — being a journalist or media support worker in countries where “freedom and democracy” has been declared by the US and UK is like playing Russian roulette with a full chamber.

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