

Why Journalists Are Being Murdered In Iraq

By [Finian Cunningham](#)

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THE saying goes that the first casualty of war is the truth. Included in this category in Iraq it seems are the people who endeavour to tell the truth, the journalists.

To date, some 65 journalists have been killed in Iraq since the US/UK invasion in March 2003, according to the internationally respected Committee to Protect Journalists. Iraq, says the CPJ, has become the deadliest recent conflict for journalists to work in.

This death toll in the space of three years compares with 66 journalists killed during the Vietnam War spanning two decades (1955-75).

In World War II (1939-45), 68 journalists were killed covering perhaps the worst conflagration in history which spread across three continents.

And in World War I (1914-18), in which the military death toll ran to 14 million, only two journalists are listed as being killed.

However, it seems that Iraq is merely reflecting a trend seen in other recent conflicts where journalists are being deliberately targeted by combatants. It almost seems like an antiquated notion now, that in war the journalist should be viewed in the same way as clerics and medics, that is, as being outside the rules of engagement.

Thus journalist casualty figures for conflicts in Argentina (1976-83) were 98; Central America (1979-89) 89; Algeria (1993-96) 58; Colombia (1986-present) 52; Balkans (1991-95) 36; and the Philippines (1983-87) 36.

Again, these figures reflect a wider and even more disturbing trend. The truth is that the first casualty of modern war and conflict is innocent civilians, men, women and children. Journalists, in trying to report this, are therefore considered legitimate targets by combatants who would want to conceal their heinous crimes.

Where did this debased morality stem from in which civilians are now deliberately thrown into the line of fire?

One significant reference point is the concept devised and deployed by the Americans and the British during World War II whereby whole areas of civilian population were deliberately targeted in bombing raids. The idea was to terrorise the enemy's people and corrode their morale. This saturation, carpet bombing of cities like Dresden, Hamburg and Tokyo annihilated millions of civilians. It was an unprecedented innovation in the tactical prosecution of war. Perhaps the nadir of this heinous logic was the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki where some 300,000 people were vapourised in seconds.

These are gargantuan war crimes and crimes against humanity for which the US and British governments and military have never been held to account. And these crimes make modern-day despots like Slobodan Milosevic and Saddam Hussein seem like street corner thugs by comparison.

The travesty perpetrated on international law and justice by the Americans and the British was like the unleashing of a psychopathic monster on the world.

Henceforth, the terrorising and murder of innocent men, women and children (the ultimate crime) became a legitimised method for states and other groups to pursue their military and political objectives. This corrosion in the standards of military conduct and respect for international laws like the Geneva Convention and UN Treaty on Torture, is now commonplace in conflicts since World War II.

To get back to Iraq, here we have an illegal war committed by the US and UK. In legal terms, it qualifies as the crime of “war of aggression”, the very same crime that Nazi leaders were convicted of at the Nuremburg.

More than 100,000 Iraqi civilians have been killed since the US and UK invaded that country. The same number of people have been imprisoned, many of them tortured.

Since hostilities officially halted in March 2004, it is well documented that Washington and London have now shifted their military tactics to that of a massive counterinsurgency operation. The idea is to weaken Iraq by a process of “Balkanisation” – that is, dividing and weakening the country into Kurdish, Sunni and Shia regions.

One way of achieving this is to foment sectarian hatred and fear in the population. Since the US and British established the Special Police Commandos, by reconstituting the remnants of Saddam’s military, there has been a torrent of “death squad executions” among the civilian population. Many of the victims, who are often found dumped on roadsides showing signs of torture before being killed with a bullet to the head, were last seen by relatives being taken away by these US/British death squads.

To get back to the death of journalists in Iraq, the majority of them have been Iraqis out on the streets trying to independently report on what is happening in their country. None of the deaths have involved those embedded journalists who ride along in US/British army humvees and helicopters.

One of those killed was Yasser Salihee. He was shot dead as he approached a US checkpoint on June 24 last year. In the previous weeks, Salihee had documented, for the Knight-Ridder news agency, dozens of cases of men being dumped at morgues after having been detained by the Wolf Brigade, the most notorious unit among the Special Police Commandos, and under the direct command of a US officer.

More recently, Iraqi journalist Atwar Bahjat was murdered while reporting on the bombing of the Al-Askari Mosque in Samarra on February 22 this year. Bahjat was a well known female television reporter working for Bahrain-based Al-Arabiya. She and her news crew, Khalid Mahmoud Al-Falahi and Adnan Khairallah, were interviewing local witnesses who claimed that they had seen what looked like police commandos entering the Mosque prior to the explosion. There were also claims that US military forces had been heavily deployed in the vicinity the previous night.

Bahjat never got to complete her investigation. She and her news crew were apprehended by what appeared to be commandos, shouting: "We want the anchorwoman." The bodies of Bahjat and her two colleagues were found hours later. They had been shot dead.

In this context, it becomes clear why journalists are now just another casualty of war, the victims of foul crime. Especially when they attempt to report the extent of those foul crimes perpetrated on the civilian population and more so when the perpetrators of these foul crimes are the master architects of dirty war, the US and Britain.

Finian Cunningham is a journalist based in Ireland finianpcunningham@yahoo.ie

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About the author:

Finian Cunningham has written extensively on international affairs, with articles published in several languages. Many of his recent articles appear on the renowned Canadian-based news website Globalresearch.ca. He is a Master's graduate in Agricultural Chemistry and worked as a scientific editor for the Royal Society of Chemistry, Cambridge, England, before pursuing a career in journalism. He specialises in Middle East and East Africa issues and has also given several American radio interviews as well as TV interviews on Press TV and Russia Today. Previously, he was based in Bahrain and witnessed the political upheavals in the Persian Gulf kingdom during 2011 as well as the subsequent Saudi-led brutal crackdown against pro-democracy protests.

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