

Killing the Messenger: The Silencing of Journalism in Iraq

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“All kidnappings and assassinations are completely rejected... especially when kidnapping a journalist. Journalists are here to tell the world about the occupation so kidnapping a journalist is going to hide the truth ... This journalist; Jill Carroll... is one of the great journalists who are against the occupation. She is considered one of the best journalists who stood against the American occupation of Iraq and she focused in her articles on... telling the world about the Iraqi people’s suffering”. (Muthanna Harith al-Dhari, Iraq’s Muslim Scholars Association.)

After the mass destruction of the city of Basra in the 1991 U.S. war on Iraq – using massive amounts of fire bombs, napalm, cluster bombs and anti-personnel bombs –, journalists of Western mainstream media tried very hard to cover up Western war crimes and shift the blame elsewhere. The mass murder of innocent Iraqi civilians was depicted as “surgical strikes” by the BBC, CNN, Fox News and other mainstream media outlets. During the 2003 U.S. unprovoked aggression against Iraq, Western journalists’ deception and distortion reached levels of criminal complicity unparalleled in the history of war propaganda. The aims were obvious; to manipulate public opinion, justify war of aggression and normalise mass murder of innocent people.

As time passed, journalists sank deeper in dishonesty and complicity in the war crimes against the Iraqi people. They have willingly accepted their role as “embedded” war propagandists for imperialist power. They are deliberately misleading the world about the war and about the Iraqi people. In particular, on how a nation of people which has always been proud of its Iraqi nationality and unity was turned into a collection of ethnic and religious groups mired in violence. These deliberately fabricated lies and imperialist divisions continue to be widened and reinforced by the Occupation forces, and promoted by Western journalists, pundits and their mainstream media.

To put it bluntly, the majority of Western journalists are outright liars and complicit in war crimes against the Iraqi people. They have no rights to be part of independent and objective journalism. They are as guilty of war crimes as George Bush, Tony Blair, Donald Rumsfeld and the rest. It should be noted that most Iraqis were bewildered to see Western journalists celebrating U.S. forces ransacking and destroying Iraq’s cultural heritages.

Today, only few Western journalists remain impartial and objective in their duty to report on the U.S. war crimes and the destruction of Iraq and the Iraqi society. However, those few independent and objective journalists who challenge power are endangered species, and may soon extinct if they remain unprotected.

According to Reporters without Borders (RSF), a total of 76 (85 as of May 2005) journalists and media staff have been killed since the U.S. unprovoked aggression against Iraq March 2003. That was more than the 63 reporters killed in the 1955-1977 conflict in Vietnam, the group said, citing figures from U.S.-based press advocacy group Freedom Forum. Iraq was the world's deadliest place for media members for the third consecutive year since the invasion, said RSF.

The BBC anchor, Nick Gowing said recently: "The trouble is that a lot of the military particularly the American military do not want us there. And they make it very uncomfortable for us to work. And I think that this...is leading to security forces in some instances feeling it is legitimate to target us with deadly force and with impunity". However, the British public broadcaster continues to propagate a distorted picture of a violent Occupation. The BBC unashamedly called the destruction of the city of Fallujah and the slaughter of 6000-8000 innocent Iraqi civilians a "necessary step to democracy", not a mass murder. Professor Justin Lewis, of Cardiff School of Journalism in Wales, wrote in a recent report that the BBC is leading the way in its support for the British Government pro-war propaganda, and failing its responsibility to the British people.

On 08 April 2003, U.S. tank fired a shell at the Palestine Hotel, where many of the independent journalists and reporters in Baghdad are based. Two journalists, Taras Protsyuk of Reuters and Jose Couse of the Spanish network Telecinco, were killed; three other journalists were injured. According to journalists in the hotel, who witnessed that attack; it was a deliberately selected target aiming at silencing independent journalists. On the same day, Tariq Ayoub, of Al-Jazeera, which has been targeted by U.S. forces, was killed by U.S. airstrike while getting ready for a live broadcast from Baghdad. It is argued that Al-Jazeera was deliberately targeted.

On 17 August 2003, Mazen Dana, a Palestinian award winning Reuters cameraman was shot dead by a U.S. tank crew at close range while trying to film outside Baghdad's Abu Ghraib prison on Sunday, after a mortar attack on the prison.

On 20 April 2004, U.S. military accepted responsibility for the deaths of two journalists, cameraman Ali Abdel Aziz and reporter Ali al-Khatib, who were shot in their car by U.S. soldiers while leaving the scene of an attack on a Baghdad hotel near a U.S. military checkpoint last month.

On 04 March 2004, the Italian war correspondent Giuliana Sgrena of Il Manifesto was wounded and an Italian intelligent officer, Nicola Calipari, was killed after U.S. soldiers shoot at their car near Baghdad airport. Like Jill Carroll of the Christian Science Monitor exposed, Sgrena was kidnapped and held hostage for few weeks by unknown group. In her diary, Sgrena wrote; "They [her captors] declared that they were committed to the fullest to freeing me but I had to be careful, 'the Americans don't want you to go back'". There is no reason not to believe her story, as Sgrena was not part of the war propaganda circus of "imbedded" journalism and have reported crimes of rape and abuses of Iraqis by U.S. forces.

The Iraqi people have no reasons and no motives to attack or take hostages those who are trying to tell the truth and expose the criminal nature of the Occupation and the crimes committed against them by imperialist power. There is substantial evidence suggesting that many of the crimes committed against independent journalists were committed by U.S.

forces and their collaborators in order to distort the truth and cover up the crimes against the Iraqi people.

In its reporting from Iraq, the Christian Science Monitor exposed some of the Occupation crimes, in particular the effects of 'Depleted' Uranium on the Iraqi population, however its reports were often biased and pro-U.S. propaganda. The Christian Science Monitor is often deliberately ignoring the criminal nature of the Occupation and its effects on the Iraqi people. The selection of particular independent journalist, Jill Carroll, bears all the hallmarks of the methods of silencing anyone with independent and anti-Occupation views used by U.S. forces and collaborators.

Those in the West who are concern about the safety of Jill Carroll and other Westerners in Iraq should direct their demands at the U.S. and its allies, the perpetrators of violence. They should know that all Iraqis have been taken hostages and continue to be imprisoned by U.S. forces. In addition, to the hostile and terrorising policy used by U.S. forces against the civilian population, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have been murdered and tens of thousands, if not hundreds have been kidnapped, detained, tortured and murdered by U.S. forces and their collaborators. Thanks to the overwhelming support of the American people.

By Contrast, Iraqis were the first to call for the release of all Western hostages. Indeed, Iraqis are against the abduction and targeting of innocent people, particularly journalists. In addition, Iraqi community leaders and anti-Occupation Resistance groups have often called on Western journalists to come to Iraq and expose the criminal nature of U.S. Occupation. Unfortunately, their calls fall on deaf ears, and the crimes of U.S. Occupation remain uncovered to the outside world. Where are the so-called "anti-war" movements and Western intellectuals? Why no one is calling for the release of Iraqi hostages?

The Occupation has many ways to silence independent journalists, distort the images of the Iraqi Resistance, and tarnish the name of Islam. In the unprovoked U.S. aggression against Iraq, truth continues to be the deliberate casualty.

Only impartial and honest journalists can keep the truth alive, and by doing so they hold accountable those who committed war crimes and crimes against humanity.

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