

Is the US army trying to take out journalists?

What, I wonder, does this tell us about the war in Iraq

First the Americans killed the correspondent of al-Jazeera yesterday and wounded his cameraman. Then, within four hours, they attacked the Reuters television bureau in Baghdad, killing one of its cameramen and a cameraman for Spain's Tele 5 channel and wounding four other members of the Reuters staff.

Was it possible to believe this was an accident? Or was it possible that the right word for these killings – the first with a jet aircraft, the second with an M1A1 Abrams tank – was murder? These were not, of course, the first journalists to die in the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq. Terry Lloyd of ITV was shot dead by American troops in southern Iraq, who apparently mistook his car for an Iraqi vehicle. His crew are still missing. Michael Kelly of The Washington Post tragically drowned in a canal. Two journalists have died in Kurdistan. Two journalists – a German and a Spaniard – were killed on Monday night at a US base in Baghdad, with two Americans, when an Iraqi missile exploded amid them.

And we should not forget the Iraqi civilians who are being killed and maimed by the hundred and who – unlike their journalist guests – cannot leave the war and fly home. So the facts of yesterday should speak for themselves. Unfortunately for the Americans, they make it look very like murder.

The US jet turned to rocket al-Jazeera's office on the banks of the Tigris at 7.45am local time yesterday. The television station's chief correspondent in Baghdad, Tariq Ayoub, a Jordanian-Palestinian, was on the roof with his second cameraman, an Iraqi called Zuheir, reporting a pitched battle near the bureau between American and Iraqi troops. Mr Ayoub's colleague Maher Abdullah recalled afterwards that both men saw

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the plane fire the rocket as it swooped toward their building, which is close to the Jumhuriya Bridge upon which two American tanks had just appeared.

“On the screen, there was this battle and we could see bullets flying and then we heard the aircraft,” Mr Abdullah said.

“The plane was flying so low that those of us downstairs thought it would land on the roof – that’s how close it was. We actually heard the rocket being launched. It was a direct hit – the missile actually exploded against our electrical generator. Tariq died almost at once. Zuheir was injured.”

Now for America’s problems in explaining this little saga. Back in 2001, the United States fired a cruise missile at al-Jazeera’s office in Kabul – from which tapes of Osama bin Laden had been broadcast around the world. No explanation was ever given for this extraordinary attack on the night before the city’s “liberation”; the Kabul correspondent, Taiseer Alouni, was unhurt. By the strange coincidence of journalism, Mr Alouni was in the Baghdad office yesterday to endure the USAF’s second attack on al-Jazeera.

Far more disturbing, however, is the fact that the al-Jazeera network – the freest Arab television station, which has incurred the fury of both the Americans and the Iraqi authorities for its live coverage of the war – gave the Pentagon the co-ordinates of its Baghdad office two months ago and received assurances that the bureau would not be attacked.

Then on Monday, the US State Department’s spokesman in Doha, an Arab-American called Nabil Khouri, visited al-Jazeera’s offices in the city and, according to a source within the Qatari satellite channel, repeated the Pentagon’s assurances. Within 24 hours, the Americans had fired their missile into the Baghdad office.

The next assault, on Reuters, came just before midday when an Abrams tank on the Jamhuriya Bridge suddenly pointed its gun barrel towards the Palestine Hotel where more than 200 foreign journalists are staying to cover the war from the Iraqi side. Sky Television’s David Chater noticed the barrel moving. The French television channel France 3 had a crew in a neighbouring room and videotaped the tank on the bridge. The tape shows a bubble of fire emerging from the barrel, the sound of a detonation and then pieces of paintwork falling past the camera as it vibrates with the impact.

In the Reuters bureau on the 15th floor, the shell exploded amid the staff. It mortally wounded a Ukrainian cameraman, Taras Protsyuk, who was also filming the tanks, and seriously wounded another member of the staff, Paul Pasquale from Britain, and two other journalists, including Reuters’ Lebanese-Palestinian reporter Samia Nakhoul. On the next floor, Tele 5’s cameraman Jose Couso was badly hurt. Mr Protsyuk died shortly afterwards. His camera and its tripod were left in the office,

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which was swamped with the crew's blood. Mr Couso had a leg amputated but he died half an hour after the operation.

The Americans responded with what all the evidence proves to be a straightforward lie. General Buford Blount of the US 3rd Infantry Division – whose tanks were on the bridge – announced that his vehicles had come under rocket and rifle fire from snipers in the Palestine Hotel, that his tank had fired a single round at the hotel and that the gunfire had then ceased. The general's statement, however, was untrue.

I was driving on a road between the tanks and the hotel at the moment the shell was fired – and heard no shooting. The French videotape of the attack runs for more than four minutes and records absolute silence before the tank's armament is fired. And there were no snipers in the building. Indeed, the dozens of journalists and crews living there – myself included – have watched like hawks to make sure that no armed men should ever use the hotel as an assault point.

This is, one should add, the same General Blount who boasted just over a month ago that his crews would be using depleted uranium munitions – the kind many believe to be responsible for an explosion of cancers after the 1991 Gulf War – in their tanks. For General Blount to suggest, as he clearly does, that the Reuters camera crew was in some way involved in shooting at Americans merely turns a meretricious statement into a libelous one.

Again, we should remember that three dead and five wounded journalists do not constitute a massacre – let alone the equivalence of the hundreds of civilians being maimed by the invasion force. And it is a truth that needs to be remembered that the Iraqi regime has killed a few journalists of its own over the years, with tens of thousands of its own people. But something very dangerous appeared to be getting loose yesterday. General Blount's explanation was the kind employed by the Israelis after they have killed the innocent. Is there therefore some message that we reporters are supposed to learn from all this? Is there some element in the American military that has come to hate the press and wants to take out journalists based in Baghdad, to hurt those whom our Home Secretary, David Blunkett, has maliciously claimed to be working "behind enemy lines". Could it be that this claim – that international correspondents are in effect collaborating with Mr Blunkett's enemy (most Britons having never supported this war in the first place) – is turning into some kind of a death sentence?

I knew Mr Ayoub. I have broadcast during the war from the rooftop on which he died. I told him then how easy a target his Baghdad office would make if the Americans wanted to destroy its coverage – seen across the Arab world – of civilian victims of the bombing. Mr Protsyuk of Reuters often shared the Palestine Hotel's elevator with me.

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Samia Nakhoul, who is 42, has been a friend and colleague since the 1975-90 Lebanese civil war. She is married to the Financial Times correspondent David Gardner.

Yesterday afternoon, she lay covered in blood in a Baghdad hospital. And General Blount dared to imply that this innocent woman and her brave colleagues were snipers. What, I wonder, does this tell us about the war in Iraq?

The American forces knew exactly what this hotel is.

The Sky News correspondent David Chater was in the Palestine Hotel when the hotel was hit by American tank fire. This is his account of what happened.

“I was about to go out on to the balcony when there was a huge explosion, then shouts and screams from people along our corridor. They were shouting, ‘Somebody’s been hit. Can somebody find a doctor?’ They were saying they could see blood and bone.

“There were a lot of French journalists screaming, ‘Get a doctor, get a doctor’. There was a great sense of panic because these walls are very thin. “We saw the tanks up on the bridge. They started firing across the bank. The shells were landing either side of us at what we thought were military targets. Then we were hit. We are in the middle of a tank battle.

“I don’t understand why they were doing that. There was no fire coming out of this hotel – everyone knows it’s full of journalists.

“Everybody is putting on flak jackets. Everybody is running for cover. We now feel extremely vulnerable and we are now going to say goodbye to you.” The line was cut but minutes later Chater resumed his report, saying journalists had been watching American forces from their balconies and the troops had surely been aware of their presence.

“They knew exactly what this hotel is. They know the press corps is here. I don’t know why they are trying to target journalists. There are awful scenes around me. There’s a Reuters tent just a few yards away from me where people are in tears. It makes you realise how vulnerable you are. What are we supposed to do? How are we supposed to carry on if American shells are targeting Western journalists?” ♦