

# Targeting Al Jazeera

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## UK Media Gagged Over Contents of Bombing Memo

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Special Features,

## UK Media Gagged Over Contents of Bombing Memo By LINDA S. HEARD

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Twenty-four later, the Mirror and all other British papers had been subjected to a "gag order" under Section 5 the Official Secrets Act at pain of prosecution.

"The Daily Mirror was yesterday told not to publish further details from a memo marked 'Top Secret', which revealed that President Bush wanted to bomb an Arab TV station," wrote Kevin Maguire in Tuesday's edition of the paper.

"The gag by the Attorney General Lord Goldsmith" the same attorney general who changed his pre-Iraq War legal opinion after being badgered by US government lawyers to do so "came nearly 24 hours after the Mirror informed Downing Street of its intention to reveal how Tony Blair talked Bush out of attacking satellite station Al Jazeera's HQ in friendly Qatar" in the spring of 2004.

The White House has characterized the Mirror's reporting as "outlandish", but if that's the case, one wonders why Downing Street has gone into crisis mode not only prosecuting two of its own civil servants David Keogh and Leo O'Connor under the Official Secrets Act but also threatening editors of British newspapers with prosecution an historical first according to Richard Taylor-Norton of the Guardian.

So while Bush is attempting to brush off the incident, the British government is appearing more as though it has its hand in the cookie jar with damage control its first priority.

When asked to comment on the memo Downing Street refused to do so saying it doesn't commented on leaked documents. Be that as it may - and provided the Mirror story is false - then, surely, an absolute denial by the Prime Minister would put the story to bed and quash the rumors.

But gag order or not this story doesn't look like it's going to disappear into the ether like so many others.

Peter Kilfoyle, Blair's former Minister of Defense, has challenged Downing Street to publish the transcript. "I believe that Downing Street ought to publish this memo in the interests of transparency," he said.

"If it was the case that President Bush wanted to bomb Al Jazeera in what is after all a friendly country, it speaks volumes and it raises questions about subsequent attacks that took place on the press that wasn't embedded with coalition forces".

For instance, Al Jazeera owned by the ruler of Qatar - is motivated to keep the story alive, since if it is true, the network along with its editors, anchors, reporters and technicians, could have been wiped off the map in the event Tony Blair hadn't succeeded in putting a damper on Bush's alleged ambitions.

Tuesday's Al Jazeera programming was red hot on the subject with experts, politicians and callers, demanding that the British government publish the memo's contents in full, which, quite honestly, hardly seems unreasonable.

And let's be clear, the White House may want us to believe the contents of the leaked memo fanciful but, unfortunately, there are precedents for believing otherwise.

When during the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan Al Jazeera's Kabul office was bombed by an American 'smart bomb', Matt

Wells of the Guardian asked "did the US mean to hit the Kabul offices of Al Jazeera TV? Some journalists are convinced it was targeted for being on the 'wrong side'.

And in April 2003 when the Iraq was in full flush, Al Jazeera's Baghdad office was hit by a US missile, killing cameraman Tariq Ayoubi and wounding Zuhair Al-Iraqi.

Then, the network's chief editor said: "Witnesses in the area saw the plane fly over twice before dropping the bombs. Our office is in a residential area and even the Pentagon knows its location."

Indeed, after the Kabul incident, Al Jazeera had made certain to pass on the coordinates of its Iraqi HQ. Moreover, on that same day the Baghdad office of Abu Dhabi television was also hit.

It's also interesting to note that prior to the invasion of Iraq former BBC war correspondent Kate Adie one of the most respected journalists in her field - told Irish Radio that the Pentagon had threatened to fire on the satellite uplink positions of independent journalists in Iraq.

Adie also said that when she questioned a Senior Pentagon office concerning the consequences of this action, he replied, 'Who cares They've been warned'.

Moreover, the former CEO of CNN Eason Jordan was forced to resign his post early this year for telling a panel at the Davos Economic Forum that he knew of 12 journalists who had been killed by coalition forces in Iraq".

Like his CNN colleagues April Oliver and Peter Arnett, as well as CBC's former producer Mary Mapes, Jordan had crossed the line by seemingly criticizing the US military, and had to go.

But does the Bush administration have a motive for wishing Al Jazeera off the planet? Take a look at some of the comments made by senior government and military officials and be the judge.

In June this year, US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld accused Al Jazeera of pounding the United States' image "day after day".

In his 2004 State of the Union address, Bush referred to Al Jazeera and other Arab networks as "hateful propaganda coming out of the Arab world".

Concerning the US 'pacification' of Fallujah when Al Jazeera reported US marines had killed hundreds of civilians which according to the leaked British memo triggered Bush's desire to finish off al Jazeera Rumsfeld said: "I can definitely say that what Al Jazeera is doing is vicious, inaccurate and inexcusable."

In March 2003, Gen. John Abizaid lashed out at an Al Jazeera reporter during a press conference because marines captured by the Iraqi military were aired sitting around drinking tea. Abizaid called the coverage "totally unacceptable" and "disgusting" prompting an American reporter to ask the general whether Al Jazeera should be classed as "hostile media".

In March 2002, Vice President Dick Cheney said the network ran the risk of being labeled "Osama's outlet to the world"

So the motive is there, there are historical precedents of physical attacks on Al Jazeera by the US military, and the British government is currently engaged in a massive cover-up, yet we are still expected to believe that the contents of the leaked memo are a mere fabrication. Do you?

If the allegations contain any veracity, then the implications are enormous.

Imagine that the free world's top dog ostensibly out to promote democracy, freedom and 'our way of life' - whatever that is - wants to bomb an independent television station on the soil of one of its closest allies, owned by the ruler of that allied country.

Not only that the British lap dog of the top dog, who loves nothing more than to wag his fingers at "evil ideologies" is actively engaged in dowsing the story with help from erstwhile legal mandarins.

What are the implications for journalists that refuse to toe the coalition line? What about free speech and freedom of the press issues?

But the most worrying question is this: If the alleged bombing of Al Jazeera had gone ahead, with consequent deaths and injuries, wouldn't this equate the US administration with the terrorism it purports to hate?

Excuse the repetition but I would like to stress that Al Jazeera is owned by an ally of the US and staffed with respected

editors and journalists from around the world, including many who formerly worked for the BBC.

These people are not terrorists or insurgents; they are not uniformed military or intelligence personnel. They are simply people trying to tell it like it is in an environment plagued by censorship, and judging by Al Jazeera's 50 million regular viewers and the ire they provoke from regional governments, they are doing something right.

I'll leave you with a hypothetical question based on Bush's alleged plan having been given the green light to proceed. Would the US have confessed to its role in the aftermath or would the mythical Abu Musab Al Zaraqawi have been set up to take the fall? Think about it.

And, finally, if the Qatari government doesn't react strongly to this memo and demand answers, won't this put an indisputable stamp on the de facto US occupation of the Gulf?

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