

Killing Journalists Then and Now: 19 Years Ago, The Battle of Baghdad, April 2003: Killing the Independent Media, Killing the “Unembedded Truth”

How best to disarm the anti-war movement? Kill the independent media and convey the illusion that "the War is over"

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Today, we are witnessing the assassination of Palestinian-American Journalist Shireen Abu Akleh in Jenin in Palestine’s Occupied West Bank.

She was deliberately targeted and killed by an Israeli soldier.

According to the Palestinian Authority government spokesperson, “all the witnesses present at the scene of the crime ensures that it was an Israeli sniper that committed the crime in a deliberate way.”



She was reporting on behalf of Al-Jazeera.

[Killing journalists is a crime against humanity](#), which has increasingly become routine.

Today our thoughts are with Shireen Abu Akleh (image right) and her family.

Her Legacy and Commitment to Truth will live.

Flash Backwards to Iraq, April 2003. Nineteen Years Ago

In the immediate wake of the Battle of Baghdad, April 9, 2003, I recall the killing of two journalists by U.S forces. Al-Jazeera’s headquarters in Baghdad was deliberately targeted.

The Pentagon sponsored media were “embedded” within the US Armed Forces. This was the basis of war propaganda. And it was tightly controlled.

Independent journalists who had not been officially approved by the invading US Forces, namely those who were “un -embedded” were targeted and killed. Tariq Ayoub, a correspondent for Al Jazeera was killed when two US missiles struck Al Jazeera’s Baghdad offices.

“The Al Jazeera cameraman was killed on the roof ‘getting ready for a live broadcast amid intensifying bombardment of the city when the building was hit by two missiles.”

“Another journalist died [Reuters Taras Protsyuk] and four others were also injured when a US tank round later hit the Palestine Hotel where at least 200 international correspondents, including Al-Jazeera reporters, are staying...” [\(See Al Jazeera report, 8 April 2003\)](#)

The killings of the journalists by US forces was deliberate. This was not an accident. In fact, it was consistent with Pentagon “guidelines” regarding independent “un-embedded journalists”.

Since the war on Iraq, killing journalists is an integral part of war propaganda, which has taken an even more dramatic turn in America’s wars and military interventions against a large number of countries including Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Afghanistan, Palestine, ... not to mention Ukraine.

The text below has not been modified, updated or edited since its publication on April 11, 2003

Michel Chossudovsky, April 9, 2018, May 12, 2022

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The Battle of Baghdad, April 2003: Killing the Independent Media, Killing the “Unembedded Truth”

By Michel Chossudovsky

April 11, 2003

The tragic death of two journalists on the 8th of April bears a direct relationship to the timing of US military operations in Baghdad. The killings were an integral part of the Pentagon’s war plans. They marked a turning point in the disinformation campaign.

On the 8th of April, Al Jazeera and Reuters were deliberately targeted. This was not an accident. In fact, it was consistent with Pentagon “guidelines” regarding the independent “unembedded journalists”, who had been reporting since the beginning of the war under the

“protection” of the Iraqi Ministry of Information.

A week prior to the war, the Pentagon had intimated that it would target the transmission of information by independent journalists, from their satellite mobile phones. (Of course, that does not mean that they would actually kill the journalists.) According to veteran BBC correspondent Kate Adie, in an interview with Irish TV, the Pentagon had:

“threatened to fire on the satellite uplink positions of independent journalists. Uplinks is where you have your own satellite telephone method of distributing information, the telephones and the television signals. According to the Pentagon official they would be ‘targeted down... Who cares.. ..They’ve been warned’” (See transcript of interview with Katie Adie, [Pentagon Threatens to Kill Independent Reporters in Iraq](#))

The underlying objective was to unseat the “unembedded media” and disrupt factual and objective reporting from the war theatre. The killing of the journalists was also a warning to media organizations from Asia and the Middle East, which were covering the war from Baghdad, without due accreditation of the US military.

With the entry of US troops into Baghdad, the independent journalists, who were operating under the protection of the Iraqi Ministry of Information, were brought under the direct control of the US military. In turn, the approved USCENTCOM “embedded journalists”, attached to various US and British divisions, were now reporting directly from Baghdad, overshadowing and silencing many of their independent “nonembedded” colleagues, who had been operating out of the Palestine Hotel.

This shift in jurisdiction over the independent journalists in Baghdad took place on the 8th of April, with the breakdown of the Ministry of Information and the killing of two independent journalists by US forces.

“A Reuters reporter, photographer, television cameraman and television technician were taken to hospital after the blast. The extent of their injuries was not immediately clear.” ([Reuters, 8 April 2003](#))

According to the Pentagon, “American soldiers who killed two foreign journalists in a Baghdad hotel had ‘exercised their inherent right to self-defence’. (quoted in the Advertiser, 10 April 2003).

The Pentagon’s objective was clear: foreclose independent reporting of the ongoing battle of Baghdad. How to achieve this objective:

- intimidate the un-embedded journalists and oblige them to seek approval and/or accreditation with the US military,
- exert direct censorship on the flow of information out of Baghdad.

Targeting “Unembedded” Humanitarian Organizations

Coincidence? On the same day, April 8th, a convoy of seven vehicles of the Red Cross (ICRC), involved in re-supplying the city’s hospitals .was “caught in cross fire”. Thirteen people were killed including the ICRC delegate in Baghdad (who is a Canadian). The vehicles

“were clearly marked with large red crosses visible from a distance.” (Health Newswire Consumer, 10 April 2003). The press reports suggest that the convoy had been deliberately targeted. The Red Cross was the last independent international aid agency operating in Baghdad. It suspended its operations that same day, April 8th.

The attack on the Red Cross, which had been working closely with Iraqi health officials and hospital staff, was also an important turning point. It laid the groundwork for bringing in the Pentagon’s approved (“embedded”) humanitarian organizations and aid agencies.

Saddam’s Statue: A Media Staged Event

The following day, 9th of April, broadcast live by network TV, the whole world had its eyes riveted on the collapse of Saddam’s 40 foot statue, portraying “a jubilant crowd.”

A couple of hundred people at most, mainly by-standers gathered in Al-Fardus Square, while the statue was brought down by US Marines in a carefully staged media event. [An Aerial photograph of the event suggests that the square had been “sealed off and guarded by tanks” \(NYC Indymedia\)](#) . The Marines had draped an American flag over Saddam’s statue and forcefully pulled it down with a tug from a tank recovery vehicle. A hundred or so people, at most, were shown on TV screens, rejoicing. (The Video is available online at Reuters. Photographs of the event are also available)

The “liberation footage” was replayed obsessively by network TV. “Iconic images” of the toppled statue were plastered on the front page of major newspapers. In chorus, the Western media portrayed this staged event as “historic”, as a spontaneous mass movement of “thousands” of “happy Iraqis”, celebrating the “Liberation of Iraq” by American troops.

Reuters first released the story on the 9th, following the Live TV newscast. The report said that “dozens” of people were celebrating the collapse of the statue. Hours later, this story had already been changed. The AFP report also acknowledged that “dozens” of people were rejoicing:

“Tanks had rumbled by late afternoon into the central Al-Fardus (Paradise) Square, where dozens of Iraqis quickly set about the massive bronze statue of the Iraqi president, a symbol of his 24-year iron-fisted rule.... Dozens of Iraqis jumped on the fallen figure shouting with joy and venting their anger by breaking it into pieces.” (AFP, 9 April 2003)

Prime Minister Tony Blair’s mouthpiece, the London Daily Express, casually inflated the “dozens” to “thousands”:

“In historic scenes reminiscent of the fall of the Berlin Wall, thousands of civilians cheered as young men mounted the statue and tied a makeshift noose around Saddam’s neck.” (Daily Express, 10 April 2003)

Baghdad was not rejoicing. Since the outset of the war, several thousand civilians had been murdered and maimed by US and British troops. US occupation forces invoking the pretext of self-defense continue to shoot indiscriminately at civilians, as evidenced by several press reports. (See for instance ABC TV broadcast, 10 April 2003). Baghdad has a population of 5.6 million and most people, fearing for the lives, decided to stay home. With the entry of

US troops, a reign of terror prevails in Baghdad.

Media Spin

The bringing down of the statue of Saddam played a crucial role in the Pentagon's propaganda campaign. Relayed by Fox News and CNN, it was immediately heralded by TV channels and news media around the World as marking an end to the war. While fighting was still ongoing, with heavy casualties on both sides, the Western media had decided in chorus: "It's in the end game now,"

In turn, the toppling of Saddam's statue had become a symbol of Iraq's "Liberation" by US forces, overshadowing everything else, including the atrocities committed by US and British forces.

Since the entry of US troops into Baghdad, civilian casualties are no longer front-page news. The slaughter of women and children and the crisis in the hospitals, is no longer an issue. The impending humanitarian crisis, reported by the relief agencies and the UN is no longer mentioned. Civilian deaths are viewed as "the price to pay" to "liberate Iraq":

"the number of Iraqi civilians accidentally killed has been far, far less than the number that would have been killed by Saddam Hussein's evil regime in the normal scheme of things" (Daily Telegraph, Sydney, 8 April 2003)

"I'm sure there will be more casualties, but it is one of the prices we have to pay" (Washington Post, 10 April 2003)

"'one day' the mothers of children killed or maimed by British cluster bombs will thank Britain for their use (British Defense Minister Geoffrey Hoon quoted in the Independent, 5 April 2003)

In turn, because "the war is nearly over", detailed and accurate reporting from the war theatre is no longer deemed necessary.

Meanwhile, financial markets rejoice. Investors on Wall Street "applauded images of a statue of Saddam...[which] sent stocks surging..." (UPI, 9 April 2003).

This "liberation euphoria" also serves to disarm the critics and create divisions within the anti-war movement. A segment of the anti-war movement now views as "positive" the demise of the Iraqi regime, thereby tacitly signifying their approval of the US military intervention in support of "regime change".

"Peace", "reconstruction", "democracy" and "the post-Saddam era" are the buzz words. The main justification for waging the war (i.e. Iraq's alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction) is no longer deemed relevant. The fact that the invasion was a criminal act in blatant violation of the UN charter and the Nuremberg charter on war crimes is no longer an issue. (For further details see [Charter of the Nuremberg Tribunal and in the Judgment of the Tribunal. Adopted by the International Law Commission of the United Nations, 1950](#)).

The Pentagon's propaganda apparatus had taken over. The targeted killing of journalists in Baghdad marked a crucial turning point. Independent reporting out of Baghdad has been seriously impaired.

News media from Arab countries including Al Jazeera, which had been threatened for their “non-Western news perspective”, were towing the line. Since the attack on its office in Baghdad, Al Jazeera’s news reports seem to have taken on a different tone.

Virtually the entire news chain has become “embedded”.

The War is not over

How best to disarm the anti-war movement and silence the critics: Convey the illusion that the war is over.

But the war is not over.

Heavy fighting is ongoing. The evidence suggests that a significant part of the Iraqi arsenal and troops is still intact. ([For further details see the report of Richard Bennett published on April 5, 2003](#)). Thousands of Iraqi troops and armed civilians including volunteers from neighboring countries are confronting the invaders.

The Pentagon has acknowledged that it only controls part of the city.

The Battle of Baghdad is not over. The struggle against US occupation has commenced.

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