

Why the US bombed al-Jazeera's TV station in Kabul

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Just before the Northern Alliance marched into Kabul on Monday November 12, US armed forces dropped a 500-pound bomb on the studios of the popular Arab satellite TV station al-Jazeera (the Peninsula). No one was hurt, as the building was not occupied at the time by any of the 10 al-Jazeera journalists and technicians based there, a decision having already been taken to evacuate the building in advance of the Northern Alliance's entry into Kabul. The same attack damaged nearby offices of the BBC and the Associated Press.

Immediately after the raid, the station's London bureau chief, Muftah Al Suwaidan, told the *Guardian* newspaper, "al-Jazeera's office is in the heart of Kabul. The building is the only one to have been hit so it looks like it was deliberate." The station's managing director, Mohammed Jassim al-Ali, said that the US had been previously informed of al-Jazeera's location.

Al-Jazeera has earned the enmity of Washington for its critical coverage of the US war in Afghanistan, and particularly by broadcasting interviews with Osama bin Laden and other al Qaeda leaders. Because of their impact on public opinion in Muslim countries, the Western media and politicians had warned that the US was in danger of losing the propaganda war. It seems that the US decided the best way to win the battle for hearts and minds was to take out its critics.

Destroying the al-Jazeera office before the Northern Alliance occupied Kabul ensured that whatever massacres and reprisals took place are less likely to be reported. Following the bombing, the station's Kabul correspondent Tasir Alouni—who has become world famous for fronting reports showing the devastation caused by the US bombing of the Afghan capital—was seized and assaulted by incoming Northern Alliance forces. He was only released after the intervention of Paktia tribal groups. Alouni was so traumatised by his

experiences that he said later he had witnessed, "scenes that, I'm sorry, I couldn't describe to anybody". Broadcasting later from eastern Afghanistan, he described his condition as one of "deep psychological shock."

The bombing of the Kabul office is not the only attempt undertaken by Washington to disrupt al-Jazeera's newsgathering and reporting.

On November 14, the station's Washington correspondent, Mohammad al-Alami, was detained at Waco airport during his efforts to cover the summit meeting between George Bush and Russian President Vladimir Putin. Al-Alami described how credit card details used to buy the plane ticket to Waco were traced to transactions in Afghanistan. When Al-Alami tried to leave Waco airport, police armed with M-16 rifles detained him, although he was later released.

The US has issued contradictory explanations of the al-Jazeera bombing. At a November 14 defence department news conference, Rear Admiral Craig R. Quigley told an al-Jazeera journalist that the bombing was a "mistake" because "a weapon went awry". Challenged as to whether the US had information regarding the location of al-Jazeera, BBC and Associated Press facilities in Kabul, Quigley replied evasively, "I don't know that we do." Colonel Rick Thomas, speaking to CBS for US Central Command, insisted that the building was "a known al Qaida facility in central Kabul... We had no indications this or any nearby facility was used by al-Jazeera. We had identified two locations in Kabul where al-Jazeera people worked, and this location wasn't among them."

On November 17, al-Jazeera's chief of Arab language broadcasting, Ibrahim Hilal, again accused the US of deliberately targeting their Kabul office. Hilal said that the station had been on a list of US targets

ever since the start of the bombing campaign, and that transmissions between Kabul and the station's headquarters in the tiny Middle Eastern emirate of Qatar were routinely monitored by US intelligence.

Suggestions that part of US war policy was to deliberately target news organisations drew attention from the *Newsworld* conference of media executives, meeting recently in Barcelona. Reflecting the broad concerns amongst journalists, BBC World correspondent Nik Gowing told the conference, "It seems to me there is some evidence to be put to the Pentagon about the targeting of news organisations... It seems people uplinking journalistic material [by satellite] can be targeted legitimately." Gowing noted, "al-Jazeera has been providing some material that has been very uncomfortable." Gowing also compared the attack on al-Jazeera to the US bombing of Serbian TV in Belgrade in 1999.

Speaking for the US military, Colonel Hoey reiterated Rear Admiral Quigley's line to the Barcelona conference that US forces did not have the location coordinates of the al-Jazeera offices, and that, in any case, "The US military does not and will not target media. We would not, as a policy, target news media organisations—it would not even begin to make sense."

But, as Gowing's comments indicate, the bombing of al-Jazeera is not the first time that the US has bombed a TV station that has broadcast reports contradicting official Pentagon propaganda about "targeted actions" and "limited collateral damage."

On April 23 1999, at the height of a NATO bombing of Belgrade, US cruise missiles destroyed the headquarters of Radio Television Serbia (RTS). Thirteen journalists and staff were killed and many more were injured. RTS, a network employing 7,000 people, and the largest TV station in the Balkans, had been providing footage and rebroadcast facilities to international news organisations, ensuring the world's population had at least some inkling of what was being done to the Serbian people. The attack followed weeks in which all the TV transmitters and private TV facilities in Serbia had been destroyed, and after an ultimatum from NATO Air Commander David Wilby demanding airtime to put NATO's case to RTS viewers. RTS and the Belgrade government of Slobodan Milosevic had apparently agreed to broadcast six hours of NATO propaganda, in return for six

minutes of Yugoslav news on European and US networks. NATO bombed RTS anyway, with US General Wesley Clarke overruling objections from other NATO governments.

Al-Jazeera has for some years figured in Washington's calculations in the Middle East and has become a target for US ire because of its reputation for independent and comprehensive coverage of Middle Eastern politics. Since its foundation in 1996, al-Jazeera has won a large audience across North Africa and the Middle East, and has antagonised political leaders from Algeria to Saudi Arabia.

The station generally advances a pan-Arab nationalist political line and is used by the Qatar government as an occasional instrument of policy. However, the station claims to employ staff from a wide range of political backgrounds, and its most popular programmes are political debates and talk shows which explore the most controversial issues in Middle Eastern politics—allowing open debate between Islamic fundamentalists, liberals, supporters and opponents of the Middle Eastern peace process. The *Jerusalem Post* estimates 40 percent of residents in the Gaza Strip watch al-Jazeera, because the station regularly exposes human rights abuses, shows live footage of riots, discusses women's rights under Islam, and criticises government parties in a region where the broadcast media is largely under state control.

Last year, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy noted the growing impact of satellite TV in the region: "From the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean, Arab governments are worried they have lost control of information, one of the key means they have used to stay in power in the past. Diplomats in the region have dubbed the phenomenon 'the al-Jazeera effect'."

In early October, US Secretary of State Colin Powell asked the Emir of Qatar, who partly finances the station, to rein in its editorial line. Al-Jazeera responded by publishing the request.



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