

US menaces Al Jazeera over Iraq reportage

Richard Phillips
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In late July, a few days after visiting Iraq, US Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz told the Murdoch-owned *Fox News Sunday* that the Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya television networks were “falsely reporting” events in Iraq and “endangering the lives of American troops”.

The provocative and unsubstantiated comments accused the Arab-language broadcasters of “spread[ing] hatred and violence” and “slanting news” in favour of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. Wolfowitz falsely claimed that the networks were “government sponsored” and ominously declared that the US government was “talking” to the station owners about their Iraq reportage.

The Qatar-based Al Jazeera, the most popular television station in the Middle East with 35 million viewers, has been a particular target of the Bush administration since the network televised reports critical of the US military attack on Afghanistan in 2001. It has been denounced by the US government and media, its offices bombed by US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan and some of its journalists killed or arrested by American troops.

Wolfowitz’s latest allegations and threats are part of an intensifying US campaign to intimidate or silence any independent or critical news coverage of the illegal US-led occupation of Iraq.

Al Arabiya rejected Wolfowitz’s accusations as “pure slander” and said US troops were not liberators but an “occupying force”. Wadah Khanfar, Al Jazeera’s bureau chief in Baghdad, wrote to Paul Bremer, the US proconsul in Iraq, demanding an apology from Wolfowitz. He made clear that the network would not be intimidated.

Khanfar’s letter, which was cited by British journalist Robert Fisk in the *Independent* newspaper, rejected any suggestion that Al Jazeera had “favourably” covered Saddam Hussein. He pointed out that its coverage had

so enraged the former Iraqi government that he and another Al Jazeera journalist were “expelled” from Baghdad by the regime. In fact, the network has been banned in Tunisia, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia and the Egyptian and Jordanian governments have sought to limit its transmissions.

“The Baghdad bureau was shut down twice by the former Ministry of Information for unfavorable coverage, and once by Al Jazeera itself in protest over attempts at censorship,” he said. “Al Jazeera reporters in Iraq have even been physically assaulted by former Information Minister Mohamed Saeed As-Sahaf for daring to broadcast events which cast the regime in an unfavorable light.”

Wolfowitz also told *Fox News Sunday* that Al Jazeera had broadcast a “totally false report” that US troops had detained Muqtada As-Sadr, a leading Shiite cleric in Najaf. Wolfowitz’s claim is a fabrication, deliberately aimed at increasing hostility against the Arab network within the US military. No such news broadcast was ever made by Al Jazeera.

As Khanfar pointed out in his letter: “Al Jazeera never stated at any time that Muqtada As-Sadr was detained. Our correspondent Yasser Abu Hilala, a top reporter with 13 years experience covering the Middle East, stated he had received phone calls from Muqtada As-Sadr’s secretary and two of his top deputies saying the imam’s house was surrounded by US forces after he called for the formation of an Islamic Army. The phone calls were not only made to our offices but to all the offices of As-Sadr’s followers in Baghdad resulting in a massive demonstration in front of the Republic Palace within 45 minutes which we reported, along with the *New York Times*, CNN and a host of others.”

Khanfar said that when Abu Hilala attempted to contact the US military’s public information centre “they did not even know about the demonstration going on in their own backyard, let alone what was happening

in Najaf. When the US military finally got around to denying the encirclement of As-Sadr's home over 24 hours later, we duly reported it."

The Al Jazeera bureau chief explained that Wolfowitz's comments had nothing to do with correcting any erroneous news coverage but were part of the "half-truths and total falsehoods about our reporting... [that] make the rounds in Washington, Baghdad and elsewhere."

He warned that "the mischaracterisations of our reporting made by Mr. Wolfowitz and others are a form of incitement to violence against Al Jazeera, the first Arab television channel to practise professional Western-style journalism free of the notorious censorship so prominent in the rest of the Middle East."

Over the past two years, Al Jazeera has been on the receiving end of an ongoing campaign of US-inspired violence and political vilification.

In 2001, a US Cruise missile destroyed Al Jazeera's office in Kabul after it criticised the US attack on Afghanistan. On April 8 this year, American bombs destroyed the media outlet's offices in Baghdad, killing a senior reporter. Al Jazeera officials explicitly warned the US military not to target the building but were ignored. The assault on the Baghdad office occurred after the network had screened footage of the US bombing of civilian targets in the city.

The same day, US forces killed two cameramen and wounded three others when an American tank opened fire on the Palestine Hotel, home to over 100 "non-embedded" foreign reporters. Last week, the US military's Central Command declared that the tank attack was "a proportionate and justifiably measured response" by American forces. The International Federation of Journalists has denounced the report, which still remains classified, as a "cynical whitewash".

Khanfar's letter said during July that Al Jazeera offices and staff in Iraq were "subject to strafing by gunfire, death threats, confiscation of news material, and multiple detentions and arrests, all carried out by US soldiers". Al Jazeera journalist Nawaf Al Shahwani was detained by US troops in the northern Iraqi town of Mosul after he filmed them opening fire on Iraqi civilians. He was released the next day but US forces confiscated the footage. American troops have also raided the network's offices in Ramadi, arresting and

harassing reporters.

Last month, the US military shut down an Iraqi newspaper and other local news outlets. American troops have also arrested Turkish, Iranian and Japanese reporters, some of whom are still being detained.

As local resistance intensifies and US military casualties increase, the Bush administration is determined to stop any reportage critical of its neo-colonial occupation of Iraq. Wolfowitz's comments indicate that the US is moving to expel Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya and any other media outlet or journalist that refuses to parrot the US military line.



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