

Al Jazeera correspondent arrested in Spain

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Al Jazeera correspondent Tayssir Alouni is being held by Spanish authorities on suspicion of aiding Al Qaeda, the Islamic fundamentalist group led by Osama bin Laden held responsible for the terrorist attacks in Washington and New York in September 2001.

Syrian born Alouni was arrested on Friday, September 5 at his home near the southern Spanish city of Grenada on the orders of Judge Baltasar Garzon, who has been leading an investigation into alleged members of Al Qaeda and other Islamic groups. Alouni's wife, Fatima Hamed Layasi, is quoted by CNN as saying that the arrest warrant accuses Alouni of having links to "important members" of Al Qaeda and of using his status as a journalist to get an interview with bin Laden in October 2001.

According to a court official, the authorities believe Alouni provided support for Imad Eddin Barakat Yarkas, alias Abu Dahdah, who was arrested on November 13, 2001, accused of being an Al Qaeda ringleader in Spain. Alouni is also said to be suspected of providing aid to Mahmed Bahiah, alias Abu Kalhed, a supposed Al Qaeda fugitive thought to be in Afghanistan.

Dozens of people have been detained in Spain since the September 11 attacks on suspicion of Islamic terrorism. Some have been released on bail or for lack of evidence and no one has yet gone to trial.

According to Associated Press, an unnamed "friend" of Alouni said that during his time at the Spanish news agency EFE's Arab-language service in Granada, where Alouni worked for several years until 2000, he became acquainted with Mohamed Zaher Asade. Asade was arrested along with seven others in November 2001, charged with being part of a Madrid-based Al Qaeda cell directly linked to the preparation and carrying out of the attacks in the US. He remains in custody along with several other suspects.

Alouni left Spain in 2000 to work for Al Jazeera,

covering the US wars against Afghanistan and then Iraq. The arrest has been condemned by the Arab news agency. Al Jazeera's editor in chief, Ibrahim Hilal, said, "Anyone can have acquaintances who are linked to Al Qaeda, and this is not a crime. It is only a crime when these relations are used in an illegal way and not when they are used for journalistic purposes."

For the Bush administration and its political allies in Spain, however, journalists who seek to report on Iraq and related matters in an objective manner or who express opinions that conflict with the official line from Washington are considered dangerous. Alouni's main crime appears to have been that he interviewed bin Laden in October 2001 for Al Jazeera, which has broadcast a number of interviews with the Al Qaeda leader.

Al Jazeera has been specifically targeted by the US. The Qatar-based station, the most popular in the Middle East with over 35 million viewers, has been subject to repeated attacks, political, legal and military, as the US desperately attempts to present its occupation of Iraq and the killing of thousands of men, women and children as a liberating mission.

US Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz claimed in July that the Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya television networks were "falsely reporting" events in Iraq and "endangering the lives of American troops." The remarks were taken as an ominous warning by Al Jazeera, given the history of US attacks upon the station. While covering the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, Al Jazeera's studios were hit by a 500-pound bomb. No one was hurt in that attack as the station had decided to evacuate the building in advance of the Northern Alliance's entry into the city of Kabul. Al Jazeera's London bureau chief, Muftah al Suwaidan, said at the time, "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."

On April 8, 2003, Al Jazeera's centre in Baghdad came under fire from US air strikes, killing 34-year-old Palestinian-Jordanian reporter Tariq Ayoub and seriously wounding several others. As with the attack in Afghanistan, the Baghdad air strike was undoubtedly a deliberate targeting of Al Jazeera. Station bosses had written to US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld on February 23 giving the precise location of their office so as to avoid being hit.

With no evidence presented against Alouni, it seems that his arrest is a continuation of the campaign to accuse Al Jazeera of political bias and being in league with terrorists. The Aznar government in Spain, having been one of the most enthusiastic supporters of the war, will be keen to aid the US in this regard as well.

The essential aim of the attacks on Al Jazeera is to prevent any accurate press coverage of the criminal character of the US operation in Iraq and the so-called "war against terrorism" unleashed in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. Since the US-led war began in March, 17 journalists have been killed in Iraq, 12 of them in action, of which five were killed by US fire. Numerous others have been held at different times by US troops.



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