

Did the US military target Italian journalist Giuliana Sgrena in Iraq?

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The shooting of Italian journalist Giuliana Sgrena and three Italian intelligence agents by US troops near Baghdad international airport on Friday night has provoked an angry response in Italy and calls for the immediate withdrawal of Italian soldiers from Iraq. Sgrena was wounded in the attack that killed Nicola Calipari, the agent who negotiated her release, and injured two others.

At the very least, the incident highlights the ruthless methods employed by the US military in the face of continuing armed resistance and widespread hostility to the US occupation. But the reality could be even more sinister: that Sgrena, who had been held hostage for a month by a little known Islamic group, was deliberately targeted either to send a warning or to silence her.

Many questions about the shooting remain unanswered. However, the least likely explanation is the one offered by the US military. According to a statement issued by the US Army's Third Infantry Division, a patrol "observed the vehicle speeding towards their checkpoint and attempted to warn the driver to stop by hand-and-arm signals, flashing white lights, and firing warning shots in front of the car." When the vehicle failed to stop, the soldiers "shot into the engine block".

Sgrena, who returned to Italy on Saturday, after being treated in a US military hospital, has disputed every element of this account. According to an Italian official, she told investigators: "We weren't going very fast, given the circumstances. It was not a checkpoint, but a patrol that started firing right after lighting up a spotlight. The firing was not justified by the movement of our automobile."

Nor was it simply a matter of "firing into the engine block" to stop the car. Sgrena described "a rain of fire while I was talking to Nicola [Calipari]". The

intelligence agent was shot dead after he screened her from the bullets with his own body. Gabriele Polo, editor of the leftist *Il Manifesto* daily for which Sgrena writes, said that Italian officials had told him that 300 to 400 rounds were fired at the car. The attack took place just 700 metres from the airport.

US President George Bush rang Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi to express his "regret" over the incident. White House spokesman Scott McClellan told the media: "The president reassured Prime Minister Berlusconi that the incident will be fully investigated." But Washington immediately sought to deflect blame for the shooting onto Italian authorities by claiming that they had not informed their US counterparts that Sgrena was in a car travelling to the airport.

Again the "explanation" does not add up. It is implausible that US authorities were not told of Sgrena's release. Calipari was a highly experienced agent with a long record of police work. He had been previously involved in hostage negotiations in Iraq, and had been instrumental in the release of two Italian aid workers last September. He operated from the US base at Camp Victory near the Baghdad airport and, according to the *Washington Post*, was working closely with a US hostage coordinator.

The incident has come as a serious political embarrassment for Berlusconi, whose government staunchly supported the illegal US-led invasion of Iraq and sent 3,000 troops to bolster the occupation despite widespread antiwar protests in Italy. Foreign Minister Gianfranco Fini, leader of the fascist National Alliance, dismissed the shooting as a tragic accident—"a joke of destiny". Communications Minister Maurizio Gasparri rejected calls for the withdrawal of Italian troops, declaring: "The military mission must carry on because

it consolidates democracy and liberty in Iraq.”

If the shooting was a “mistake”, it only confirms that the US military presence in Iraq has nothing to do with “democracy and liberty”. If a high-profile journalist whose capture and release made the international headlines can be gunned down along with Italian intelligence agents by US troops, how many Iraqi men, women and children have suffered the same fate for failing to obey US military orders? Only a few of the worst instances have been reported in the international media.

This “innocent” explanation is, however, the least plausible. As Sgrena concluded, the evidence points to a deliberate attack. Speaking to Sky TG24 news, she raised the possibility that the car had been targeted because Washington did not agree with the methods employed by Italian authorities. “The fact that the Americans don’t want negotiations to free the hostages is known. The fact that they do everything to prevent the adoption of this practice to save the lives of people held hostage, everybody knows that. So I can’t see why I should rule out that I could have been the target,” she said.

In an article entitled “My Truth” published on Sunday in *Il Manifesto*, she recalled that her captors had warned her to be cautious after her release. She had dismissed the caution as “superfluous and ideological” but in the midst of the shooting recalled the words. “They declared that they were committed to the fullest to freeing me but I had to be careful, ‘the Americans don’t want you to go back’.”

Sgrena’s companion Pier Scolari was more forthright in his accusations. He told the media: “The US military did not want Giuliana to come out alive... Giuliana had information and the US military did not want her to come out alive.” Neither he nor Sgrena has, to this point, indicated what that information might be.

Communications Minister Gaspari urged restraint, declaring: “I understand the emotion of these hours, but those who have been under stress in the past few weeks should pull themselves together and avoid saying nonsense.” The Italian intelligence agency SISMI dismissed suggestions that the attack was deliberate, but provided no further information. Significantly, the main “evidence” was the crude character of the attack. It would have been more effective, SISMI reasoned, for US agents to kill her and find a way to blame it on

Iraqis.

While the scenarios advanced by Sgrena and Scolari may or may not be correct, it certainly cannot be ruled out that the US military would deliberately target the journalist. She had, after all, a record of opposition to the US invasion and subsequent occupation. Sgrena, who has specialised in covering the Middle East and North Africa, has written a number of articles for *Il Manifesto* on the appalling social conditions in Iraq and on the torture of prisoners in the notorious Abu Ghraib jail.

Sgrena was abducted on February 4 after interviewing refugees from Fallujah at a mosque in the grounds of Baghdad University. Two weeks later, her captors released a video showing her in tears pleading for her life and calling for the withdrawal of Italian and foreign troops from Iraq. The video provoked a march by tens of thousands in Rome and an ongoing campaign in Italy for Sgrena’s release.

Last Friday’s shooting would not be the first time that journalists, especially those critical of the war in Iraq, have been targeted by US military. Tarek Ayyoub, a correspondent for Al Jazeera, was killed in April 2003 when US warplanes bombed the network’s offices in Baghdad. In March 2004, two journalists with the Al Arabiya station were shot dead by US troops while covering a rocket attack on a Baghdad hotel. These murders give the lie to the suggestion that the US military is overly concerned about the political fall-out from its methods.

The attack on Sgrena’s car and the death of Nicola Calipari have already provoked outrage in Italy. Thousands of Italians have paid tribute to Calipari’s valour and a state funeral will be held for him today. Last weekend, a protest in Rome condemned the shooting and demanded the withdrawal of Italian troops from Iraq. The incident threatens to further undermine the Bush administration’s so-called coalition of the willing, following the pullout of other contingents of European troops.



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