

British government threatens prosecution to suppress claim that Bush sought to bomb Al Jazeera

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The British government has threatened editors with prosecution under the Official Secrets Act if they publish further details from a top secret memo that apparently records US President George W. Bush's desire to bomb the headquarters of Arab TV station Al Jazeera in the Persian Gulf sheikdom of Qatar.

The *Daily Mirror* has been a particular target because it published a front-page exclusive on the memo under the headline "Bush plot to bomb his ally," on Tuesday, November 22. According to the newspaper, the five-page memo was a secret minute of a conversation held between Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair on April 16, 2004.

The meeting took place during a major US offensive against the Iraqi city of Falluja, whose 300,000 civilians had been placed under military siege. The minute is alleged to record a threat by Bush to unleash "military action" against Al Jazeera's head offices, which are in Doha, the capital of Qatar, then host to US military headquarters. According to the *Mirror*, Blair managed to dissuade Bush from taking such action.

An unnamed source told the newspaper, "The memo is explosive and hugely damaging to Bush. He made clear he wanted to bomb *Aljazeera* in Qatar and elsewhere. Blair replied that would cause a big problem. There's no doubt what Bush wanted to do—and no doubt Blair didn't want him to do it."

Another unnamed source told the newspaper, "Bush was deadly serious, as was Blair. That much is absolutely clear from the language used by both men." Such an attack would have been "the most spectacular foreign-policy disaster since the Iraq war itself," the *Mirror* said.

According to the newspaper, the memo "turned up" in 2004 at the offices of Labour MP Tony Clarke, who has since lost his seat. Civil servant David Keogh is accused of passing the memo to Leo O'Connor, a former researcher for Clarke. Keogh and O'Connor have been charged under the Official Secrets Act and are due to appear in court next

week. It is likely that at least part of the trial will be held in secret.

In a statement, *Mirror* Editor Richard Wallace said the newspaper had checked with Blair's office before going into print. "We made No 10 fully aware of the intention to publish and were given 'no comment' officially or unofficially," he said. Yet within 24 hours Attorney General Lord Goldsmith had threatened the *Mirror* and others with prosecution under Section Five of the Act.

"Publication of a document that has been unlawfully disclosed by a Crown servant could be in breach of Section 5 of the Official Secrets Act," Goldsmith warned newspaper editors. Goldsmith also threatened to take out an immediate High Court injunction unless the *Mirror* confirmed that it would not publish further details. The *Mirror* said, "We have essentially agreed to comply."

Despite its threats, the government has not directly challenged the memo's authenticity, claiming that any statement would be subjudice due to the pending court case.

In a statement to BBC Two's "Newsnight" programme, Clarke said that he had returned the memo to its source after reading it, because it contained information that threatened the "loss of British lives in Iraq."

Interviewed on the same programme, Labour MP and former Defence Minister Peter Kilfoyle confirmed that he had heard of the alleged memo eighteen months before and that he was "convinced that the suggestion that President Bush wanted to bomb Al Jazeera" was true.

Kilfoyle has tabled a parliamentary motion calling on Blair to release the full text of the memo. Rejecting suggestions that any comment by Bush mooted an attack on Al Jazeera was made as a joke, Kilfoyle said, "There was an attack on the hotel in Baghdad used by Al Jazeera journalists which caused great controversy. The US also attacked a Serbian TV station [during the Kosovo war]. It is easy to dismiss this as a glib comment, but I don't find it very funny at all."

In a statement, Al Jazeera said it was "going through a due

diligence process of verifying the details of the *Daily Mirror* report.” It continued, “If the report is correct then this would be both shocking and worrisome not only to Al Jazeera but to media organisations across the world. We sincerely urge both the White House and Downing Street to challenge the *Daily Mirror* report and in the event that the memo is found to be accurate it would be incumbent on them to explain their positions on statements regarding the deliberate targeting of journalists and news organisations.”

Failure to do so “would cast serious doubts in regard to the US administration’s version of previous incidents involving Al Jazeera’s journalists and offices.”

The US administration dismissed the *Mirror*’s report and said allegations that it should deliberately target the news agency were “outlandish.” The record shows otherwise.

In November 2002, Al Jazeera’s office in Kabul, Afghanistan was destroyed by a 500-pound US bomb. No one was hurt, as the building was unoccupied at the time. The US claimed that they believed the target was a terrorist site, despite having been informed of Al Jazeera’s location previously.

On April 8, 2003, Al Jazeera reporter Tariq Ayoub was killed in a direct strike with US missiles on the news agency’s offices in Baghdad, Iraq. Several other Al Jazeera staff were seriously wounded in the attack.

The nearby offices of Abu Dhabi TV were also attacked, causing its correspondent Shaker Hamed to issue an emergency on-air call for help. “Twenty-five journalists and technicians belonging to Abu Dhabi television and Qatari satellite television channel Al Jazeera are surrounded in the offices of Abu Dhabi TV in Baghdad,” Hamed pleaded.

A US State Department spokesman had said the strikes were a “mistake”. But shortly afterwards, two cameramen were killed when a US tank fired on Baghdad’s Palestine Hotel, home to more than 200 international correspondents—nearly all of the journalists not “embedded” with the military.

The victims in that attack were Reuters cameraman Taras Protsyuk and Jose Couso, who worked for the private Spanish television station Telecinco. Another three members of the media were injured.

Al Jazeera journalist Tayssir Allouni was witness to both the attack on the agency’s office in Afghanistan and the strike on the Palestine Hotel. As bureau in chief in Kabul, Allouni narrowly missed death in the attack on its office and he reported on the US military’s bombing of the Palestine Hotel.

Allouni was recently sentenced to seven years imprisonment by a Spanish court for assisting terrorists—charges he rejected. The prosecution claimed that a 2001 interview he had made with Osama bin Laden was

proof of his connections with Al Qaeda.

It is not only Al Jazeera that has been targeted. Reporters Without Borders states that eight journalists and media assistants have been killed by the US military. These include British ITV journalist Terry Lloyd, who was killed outside Basra by US forces at the start of the war.

Lloyd was one of the few non-embedded journalists who had managed to enter Iraq at that time. Daniel Demoustier, the French cameraman injured in the same attack, said that US forces had continued to fire shells on their vehicles even after Lloyd had been killed and accused the military of attempting to “wipe out troublesome witnesses.”

In his State of the Union address in 2004, Bush denounced “hateful propaganda” coming from Al Jazeera and other news agencies. Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld have also made no secret of the administration’s hostility to the network.

Questioned on the memo on BBC Two’s “Newsnight” programme, Frank Gaffney from the US-based Centre for Security Policy queried whether the targeting of news agencies for military attack was really “outrageous.” Whether or not the memo was authenticated, Al Jazeera was an “instrument of enemy propaganda” in a war that the US was “obliged to fight and win,” he said.

“To the extent Al Jazeera is actively aiding our foes” it is “appropriate to talk about what you do to neutralise it,” he continued. This was a news agency that has placed its offices and personnel “in harms way” in the service of “enemies” of “freedom-loving people.” This put it “squarely in the target” he went on, and made it “fair game.”



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