

Journalists in the Crossfire ^[1]

Amman, Jordan

Word came yesterday of the death of Mazin Al-Tumaizi, a Palestinian working in Iraq as a producer for Al-Arabiya, a Dubai-based 24/7 Arabic-language news channel.

Al-Tumaizi died when a US helicopter fired into a crowd of people gathered around a burning Bradley Fighting Vehicle on Haifa Street in central Baghdad. The military says the crowd was looting the vehicle and it acted to protect the weapons, ammunition and equipment inside. A Reuters cameraman who was there disputes that account. Al-Tumaizi was one of 13 people killed in the incident, according to an Iraqi health ministry official. He is the third Al-Arabiya journalist to die in Iraq since the war began 18 months ago.

Why is it that we journalists celebrate ourselves for risking our lives in war zones, then cry foul when someone actually gets killed, particularly in Iraq where insurgents (resistance fighters, terrorists, whatever) clearly regard journalists as fair game, and there is a fairly widespread belief that the coalition forces have a cavalier attitude toward media safety? I know more than a few Arab journalists who are convinced the United States actively targets Arab reporters. I know lots of western reporters who have never accepted the official explanation for the US attacks on both the Baghdad office of Al-Jazeera and the Palestine Hotel that killed several journalists as US forces advanced into the Iraqi capital.

Part of the problem, I think, is that we reporters see ourselves as neutral and long for a time when combatants generally acknowledged that neutrality. The high water mark of that era of journalism may have been the early '80s when various militias controlled Lebanon but accorded western media fairly free movement throughout the country. That began to change in the middle of the decade with the rise of Hezbollah and the development of hostage-taking as a combat tactic. It completely fell apart in Bosnia, and has pretty much remained that way ever since.

Personally I have never seen any evidence that the US military actively targets journalists, but neither have I seen much evidence that they go out of their way not to hit journalists when launching an operation like yesterday's on Haifa Street. As far as the insurgents go, there's little evidence that they actively target journalists – from their perspective simply being a foreigner in Iraq is enough to put you on their target list.

It seems likely that Iraq will continue to be an exceedingly dangerous posting for anyone willing to accept it... and within several of the US TV networks fewer and fewer people are, in fact, willing to go to Baghdad (most American TV networks rotate their Baghdad staff about every six weeks. Print people often have the dubious pleasure of being based in Baghdad full-time, albeit with generous vacation leave). Another trend in the on-going war that seems unlikely to change.
