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Why Did You Want to Bomb Me, Mr Bush and Mr Blair?:

Al-Jazeera's quest for answers has been met with silence from both the White House and Downing Street

Wadah Khanfar

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I have lost count of the number of accusations levelled against al-Jazeera and the incidents of harassment to which it has been subjected since it was founded in 1996. It was rumoured to have been set up by Israel's Mossad intelligence agency with the purpose of improving Israel's standing in the Arab world. It has also been accused of being a CIA mouthpiece designed to disseminate western culture among the Arabs. Some have suggested that it is part of an international conspiracy to break up the Arab world by means of stirring up discord and creating problems for the Arab regimes. Others decided it was a front for Osama bin Laden and the Taliban; or funded by Saddam Hussein. And, at the same time, it has been condemned by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and bitterly criticised by Donald Rumsfeld.

We know that the intelligence services of some Arab regimes have resorted to spreading rumours about al-Jazeera in an effort to deter Arab viewers from watching it. These are the same regimes that recalled ambassadors from Qatar in protest at its hosting al-Jazeera, and the same regimes that closed the station's offices in their countries and detained its correspondents.

Until 2001, al-Jazeera was perceived in a positive way in the west as a whole and the US in particular. It was seen as the single most important force for reform and democracy across the Arab region. Harassment by Arab regimes was considered proof of its professionalism and testimony to its objectivity. Indeed, al-Jazeera had from its foundation the slogan of "the opinion and the other opinion" and refused to favour one side over another at the expense of truth. As a result, in record time al-Jazeera became the Arabs' number one channel, and last year it was voted the fifth most influential brand name in the world, after Starbucks, Ikea, Apple and Google.

In the aftermath of the September 11 events, al-Jazeera found itself on the frontline of media coverage in both Afghanistan and Iraq. The greater its reputation became globally, the more frustrated some western governments became. The "other opinion" this time did not seem to suit international decision-makers. Criticisms started pouring in and created an opportunity for some Arab regimes to incite the US administration against al-Jazeera; some have even gone as far as demanding the closure of al-Jazeera as a precondition for full cooperation with the US.

Iraq has been a crucial turning point not only in al-Jazeera's work but for media coverage as a whole; 74 journalists, crew and their translators have lost their lives since the start of the war - two of them belonging to al-Jazeera. As far as harassment goes, al-Jazeera has incurred the biggest share. It has been accused by the US of inciting violence through the broadcast of al-Qaida tapes and of playing footage of beheadings. Our viewers know that no beheadings whatsoever were shown on our screens. And we follow strict professional rules in handling the tapes of Bin Laden and other al-Qaida leaders; we only play short, carefully selected and clearly newsworthy clips, and they are followed by analytical discussion, frequently including American commentators.

Al-Jazeera's offices in Kabul and Baghdad were bombed; we were told at the time that both bombings were mistakes. We pushed for an official investigation, but thus far have received neither the findings of any

investigation nor any official apology. The al-Jazeera cameraman Sami al-Hajj was arrested in Afghanistan and has for the past four years been detained in Guantanamo. We have repeatedly asked for an explanation, but none has been given to us.

We believe that all this harassment has been a worthwhile price for our professional commitment to reporting the truth. However, the story in the Daily Mirror, which published a leaked document it claimed was a transcript of a meeting in April 2004 between George Bush and Tony Blair, points to a level of threat to our very existence that had never occurred to us or to our viewers before. If it is true that Bush had indeed thought of bombing the al-Jazeera headquarters in Doha, this will undoubtedly constitute a watershed in the relationship between government authorities and the free media. I decided, in view of the great shock and bewilderment felt by many people around the world, to travel to London to look for the truth behind a press report whose reverberations across the Middle East - where reform and democracy have been promised - are far from over.

My colleagues have submitted a memorandum to 10 Downing Street, urging the British government to reveal the truth about the alleged document, and stressing that publishing the part within it relating to al-Jazeera is essential to put an end to speculation. After all, the matter concerns an institution that has never perceived itself to be an enemy of anyone. Our journalists are civilians who have gained the confidence of most Arabic-speaking viewers around the world. The failure to disclose the contents of the memo will cause a great deal of harm and will seriously undermine relations between media and government, and between the western and Arab worlds.

I brought many questions with me to London; it would seem that I shall return to Doha - where al-Jazeera is based - with even more misgivings. Officials in Britain have come up with nothing, and their silence is likely to reinforce suspicion and mistrust. This will not be the end of the road; we are taking legal advice and won't rest until we know the full truth.

However, I shall be returning to Doha with a lot of hope. The support and sympathy that I have sensed from colleagues in the British media represent the best consolation for me and my colleagues at al-Jazeera, whose viewers have seen for themselves the view of British and other western journalists that the truth should be disclosed in full. The issue does not only concern al-Jazeera; it concerns the truth for which we have withstood nine years of pressure and harassment, and for which many journalists around the world have endured all forms of intimidation; it is the truth for which Tayseer Allouni is serving a prison sentence in Spain, for which Sami Al-Hajj continues to be detained in Guantanamo and for which Tariq Ayoub died in Iraq.

Wadah Khanfar is the director general of al-Jazeera manager@aljazeera.net