

Atwar Bahjat

In Iraq, a reporter and patriot is silenced.

By Jihad Ballout

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates

She was a daughter of Samarra, an Iraqi who lived for her country as much as for her profession. That's why we in Al-Arabiya's newsroom were not surprised when Atwar Bahjat insisted on covering the escalating violence in her hometown that fateful February day.

The bombing of the Shiite shrine Askariya, known as the Golden Mosque, had sparked sectarian battles, an assignment that would cause many experienced journalists to shudder. Not Bahjat, who believed that carrying out her professional duty was an act of non-partisan patriotism.

Bahjat had already filed reports from Samarra and was conducting additional interviews that day, February 22, when two armed men approached and demanded: "Where is that Al-Arabiya presenter?" She kept her cool, believing, perhaps, that her patriotism and professionalism would save the day. The group around her had less faith, and either stood by or quietly dispersed as assailants seized her. The bullet-laced bodies of Bahjat, 30, and her freelance crew—cameraman Khaled Mahmoud al-Falahi, 39, and engineer

Adnan Khairallah, 36—were found near Samarra the next day.

Bahjat represented everything that the merchants of war on all sides despise. A journalist who refused to take sides, she personified Iraqi non-sectarianism—having a Shiite mother from the sect's heartland in Karbala and a Sunni father from Samarra itself. She carried her belief not only in her heart but around her neck in the form of a gold pendant depicting the map of all of Iraq. She was wearing the pendant that day.

Covering wide-scale death and destruction in her country was not, perhaps, foremost on her mind when Bahjat decided that journalism was her life and passion. An avid writer of verse, Bahjat first joined the staff of a weekly publication covering social issues, and she contributed works of poetry to specialized publications. After the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, she joined the newly founded Iraqi Satellite Network as a reporter. Bahjat's professional aspirations would draw her to the more widely viewed regional satellite networks—first to Al-Jazeera, where we were also colleagues, and then, just weeks before her murder, to Al-Arabiya. At the satellite stations, she became the most recognized female war correspondent in the region.

Breaking in at Al-Jazeera, Bahjat had to make it the hard way. She persistently lobbied for field work, ulti-



Atwar Bahjat, in an image taken from video, wore a gold pendant depicting Iraq on the day she died.

mately prevailing in the face of much resistance from male colleagues. Some genuinely feared for her safety as a female correspondent in a predominantly male environment.

When we were both at Al-Jazeera, I recall Bahjat approaching me one day to express concern that she would not get to do much field work because authorities had banned the channel from reporting inside Iraq. I pointed out that it could be a blessing in disguise, given the worsening security situation in Baghdad.

Bahjat was too courteous to bicker, but she made it very obvious that her view was far different. When others might suggest limits on her work, she would flash a smile that was both infectious and enigmatic. She was adept at finding a way around obstacles.

Yet the traits that served her well—as a woman who personified all of Iraq, as a patriot who reported all sides—could not protect her from the purveyors of violence. In an interview aired on Al-Arabiya after Bahjat's murder, her sister Ithaar repeated over and over in a heartbreaking voice: "Why, why Atwar? I need someone to tell me why!" Her words reflect the anguish of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis who fear a world inured to personal tragedy. ■

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