

# Shattered bridges

Is there more to the abduction of Italian journalist Giuliana Sgrena than meets the eye?  
**Samia Nkrumah**, in Rome, reports

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Three weeks after the kidnapping of Giuliana Sgrena, the journalist with the Italian leftist daily *Il Manifesto* the Italian Embassy in Baghdad advised all Italian journalists in Iraq to leave within 48 hours.

According to the Italian ANSA news agency, a tip-off from the Italian military secret service or *Sismi*, was behind the decision. Government officials here have denied a link between Sgrena's abduction and the call for the journalists' withdrawal. A few days earlier, in the only released video of Sgrena since her capture, she was shown pleading for her life and urging all journalists to leave Iraq.

At a "marathon" session of speeches by journalists in the Rome-based headquarters of the National Federation of the Italian Press (FNSI), the federation's secretary complained, "It's a worrying scenario because there are no more testimonies." From now on information will be obtained through official informers, the last thing one would expect following national elections.

"We are either manipulated or pushed into silence," said the editor-in-chief of *Il Manifesto*, Gabriele Polo, at the same meeting. Expressing the bewilderment and helplessness of his colleagues, he questioned, "Why must we wonder every minute if what we write might harm Giuliana?" That same day Polo's paper came out with the headline "Without News" in reference not only to Sgrena's situation but also to the future lack of first hand reports from Iraq.

The "peace correspondent" as she is mostly referred to by her colleagues, Sgrena has been the quintessential anti-war activist, writer, and journalist throughout her long career. She was captured outside a mosque in Baghdad while waiting to interview Falluja refugees for a story on the impact of the raid on their lives. Like many female correspondents, Sgrena tended to focus on the effect of war on ordinary people rather than recount the battle stories.

Sgrena is the ninth Italian and third woman to be kidnapped. The other two women worked with the Italian NGO, "A Bridge for Baghdad". With the deteriorating security situation inside Iraq, the latest Italian hostages have been critics of the military occupation rather than employees in foreign companies. Enzo Baldoni another independent journalist who was killed while in capture was himself working on a Falluja story.

With so little information at hand, it is impossible to verify the identity of the kidnapers in such cases. The motives for the kidnapping could be political or criminal and the incident publicises the kidnapers demands, whether those be political or financial. In general, analysts agree that the situation is very complex. European parliamentarian Giuletto Chiesa says that there is undoubtedly a proliferation of various groups of undetermined political positions in Iraq.

"There is hardly a group, military or paramilitary, terrorist or an espionage organisation that

is not linked to or infiltrated by another group, so while on one hand it could be very dangerous for hostages, the upside is that there are plenty of channels to negotiate their release." he commented.

Three weeks into Sgrena's capture and amid rumours that she was sold to another set of captors, the question on everyone's lips is why are pacifist civilians kidnapped in Iraq? What sense is there in eliminating journalists who are known for publishing information that goes against the occupation?

The Council of Muslim Scholars or Ulema Council, highest Sunni authority in Iraq has appealed for Sgrena's release soon after her capture became known, pointing out that this kidnapping defames the name of the resistance. The Qatari satellite TV *Al-Jazeera* has aired a two-minute film showing the Italian journalists opposition to the war in Iraq. The Dubai-based *Al-Arabia* has shown interviews with her colleagues on her work, highlighting the fact that the Italian journalist was last seen working on a story on the effect of the bombing of Falluja on its residents. The two Arab TVs have themselves appealed for the Italian journalist's release on behalf of their management and staff.

*Il Manifesto* has not stopped printing articles and photos by Sgrena since February 4, the day she disappeared, underscoring her sympathy for ordinary Iraqis. These days the words "Free her" in Arabic are splashed across the first page of *Il Manifesto*. This week a letter from Sgrena's companion was translated into Arabic in full and displayed on the front page of the paper.

Not surprisingly, Sgrena's present predicament has attracted the widest support from Italians who came out in various protests and marches since her capture, culminating in last week's half-a-million silent protest in the capital Rome. The march came on the heels of parliament's recent vote to keep troops in Iraq and was attended by the main opposition leaders including Romano Prodi as well as many leading Catholic figures.

So far those efforts have not born fruit and the nagging question about who benefits from terrorising foreign pacifists continues.

With so little information at hand, no one is saying that the Iraqi secret service is behind the latest kidnapping, but the nagging question as to who benefits from terrorising anti-occupation civilians persists.

Two recent developments are worth noting. Earlier in the year, *Newsweek* reported that the Pentagon is considering using the "Salvador Option" in reference to a counter-insurgency strategy of the 1980s which saw the CIA-train local secret forces to go after leftists insurgents and their sympathisers in the Central American country and which led to tens of thousands of deaths.

A few weeks ago, and of particular interest to Italy, researcher Daniele Ganser with the Centre for Security Studies at the Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich published a book on the NATO's Secret Armies after WWII. The research offers plenty of proof on how NATO and the secret services in various European countries collaborated in attacks on civilians that were blamed on left-wing groups. It was not till the early 1990s that a former Italian prime minister, Giulio Andreotti confirmed that the secret group, code-named *Gladio*, existed.

Ganser's book contains various documented confessions including this chilling statement by former Gladio member, a right-wing extremist who was convicted for his part in one fatal attack, "You had to attack civilians, people, women, children, innocent people, unknown people far removed from any political game. The reason was quite simple. They were supposed to force these people, the Italian public, to turn to the state to ask for greater security."

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