

JOURNALISTS KILLED AND INJURED IN LEBANON

WHY THE AFP INVESTIGATION POINTS TO THE ISRAELI ARMY



An AFP investigation into the October 13, 2023 double strike on journalists in southern Lebanon



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Summary

At 18:02 on October 13, a group of seven journalists — two from AFP, three from Reuters and two from Al Jazeera — were hit by two strikes, 37 seconds apart, in southern Lebanon. Reuters journalist Issam Abdallah was killed instantly.

The other six were injured. AFP's Christina Assi is still in hospital, has undergone surgery 15 times and had her right leg amputated.

AFP gathered witness testimonies, satellite imagery, and dozens of videos and pictures, including of munitions remnants. It partnered with Airwars, a UK-based organisation with a team of investigators and a network of world-renowned forensic and military experts, to have the evidence analysed and produce a 3D model of the moment the journalists were hit.

The arms experts all confirmed that a munitions remnant from the first strike was from an Israeli-manufactured fin-stabilised 120mm tank round that is used with Israel's Merkava 3 and 4 tanks, and not used by any other actors in the region.

The strike appears to have originated near the Israeli village of Jordeikh. This is supported by the direction of the blast pattern. Audio and images, corroborated by satellite imagery and witness testimony, indicate the presence of Israeli military vehicles near Jordeikh prior to the attack.

The journalists were not travelling with any non-civilian personnel and were clearly recognisable as journalists. They chose the spot because it was an open area where they would be standing in plain view. The investigation found that there was no military activity in the immediate vicinity.

All journalists reported almost continuous drone presence overhead during the hour preceding the strikes, as evidenced by the audio from their cameras. In the absence of a military target, the fact that the same spot was hit twice in quick succession rules out a misfire.

Methodology

AFP spent seven weeks gathering evidence to establish with the highest possible degree of certainty the circumstances surrounding the October 13 strikes in southern Lebanon.

To conduct this work, AFP assembled a dedicated team, drawing on some of its most experienced conflict reporters, digital investigators, graphic designers and editors.

AFP spoke to five journalists who were on the scene that day as well as other journalists who arrived soon after the incident, first responders, and local residents who were quick to reach the site of the deadly strikes.

AFP obtained or viewed more than 30 videos and dozens of still pictures shot by journalists before, during and after the strikes, as well as images taken by local residents of the scene and of various munitions remnants. It gained access to satellite imagery of the suspected area from which the strikes originated.

For this report, AFP sent letters to the Israeli Defence Forces, the Lebanese government as well as to the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon monitoring the border between Israel and Lebanon.

The investigative team set up by AFP to write this report entered into a partnership with Airwars to have its experts analyse the video and audio evidence gathered and produce a 3D model of the moment the journalists were hit.

Airwars is a UK-based independent organisation, whose team of investigators and network of world-renowned forensic experts have in recent years produced ground-breaking work in places such as Ukraine, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, Libya, Gaza and Israel.

The not-for-profit is now the world's largest open-source documenter of civilian harm from explosive weapons in conflict. [Airwars](#) doesn't take a political position on any of the conflicts it monitors. The organisation counts a former AFP journalist, Joe Dyke, among its employees.

Airwars spoke to six military experts to identify the munitions used and study the footage and pictures provided by AFP, collected online, or from other media outlets. AFP spoke to another three armament experts to verify the same material.

Note: All times in this document are expressed in local time (Lebanon)

Context

Following the unprecedented attack led by Hamas on Israeli territory which was launched from the Gaza Strip on October 7, the Lebanese group Hezbollah – or allied Palestinian factions – launched attacks on northern Israel, prompting fears of a major military escalation along the border.

Amid speculation that the war between Israel and Hamas could expand to the region, close monitoring of border clashes became an important part of coverage plans by AFP and other media.

In that context, AFP's Beirut bureau started sending journalists to southern Lebanon to reinforce the team of freelance correspondents based in the area. On October 13, video reporter Dylan Collins and photographer Christina Assi were working in the Alma al-Shaab area, close to the UN-patrolled border.

Dylan Collins, 35, is a seasoned reporter who has worked as AFP's senior video coordinator for Syria and Lebanon, based in Beirut, since 2019. He was wounded in a Russian drone strike while on assignment in Ukraine in July 2023.

Christina Assi, 28, is a photographer who has worked on AFP's Middle East photo desk in Cyprus since 2019 and was sent on assignment to Lebanon to reinforce the bureau following the October 7 attacks.

Collins and Assi, both of them duly accredited and working in the area with the permission of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), spent part of the afternoon of October 13 monitoring cross-border tension, mostly taking images of distant signs of clashes as did several other reporters from local and international media outlets.

That day, which was relatively calm until mid-afternoon, Collins and Assi monitored the border area, travelling east from Naqura to Maroun al-Ras and back to Marwahin, where they met with another group of reporters.

Before the strikes

Following local media reports aired at around 16:30 of an attempted infiltration into Israel by Palestinian militants based in Lebanon, the Israeli army launched retaliatory attacks across the border.

Al Jazeera reporters Carmen Joukhadar and Elie Brakhya went in search of a location from which to witness the clashes and stopped their vehicle near the town of Alma al-Shaab after seeing a column of smoke rise from the area.

A group including Collins, Assi as well as a photographer with the Associated Press, Hassan Ammar, and three Reuters journalists – Issam Abdallah, Thaer al-Sudani and Maher Mazen – regrouped in Marwahin to assess the situation.

The Reuters journalists checked in with their security coordinator and set off in their vehicle towards Alma al-Shaab, followed by the AFP vehicle. The convoy reached the spot where the Al Jazeera crew was already working by around 4:50 pm.



(AFP, © Planet labs PBC)

The exact coordinates of where the journalists were: (33°06'04.4"N 35°11'53.4"E)

The three crews spent the next hour taking images of the border area to capture Israeli shelling on Lebanese hills some distance to the south.



(© Airwars)

The Al Jazeera team was first to the location and started its first live feed at 16:54, showing apparent Israeli strikes across the border and an Apache helicopter flying overhead at one point.

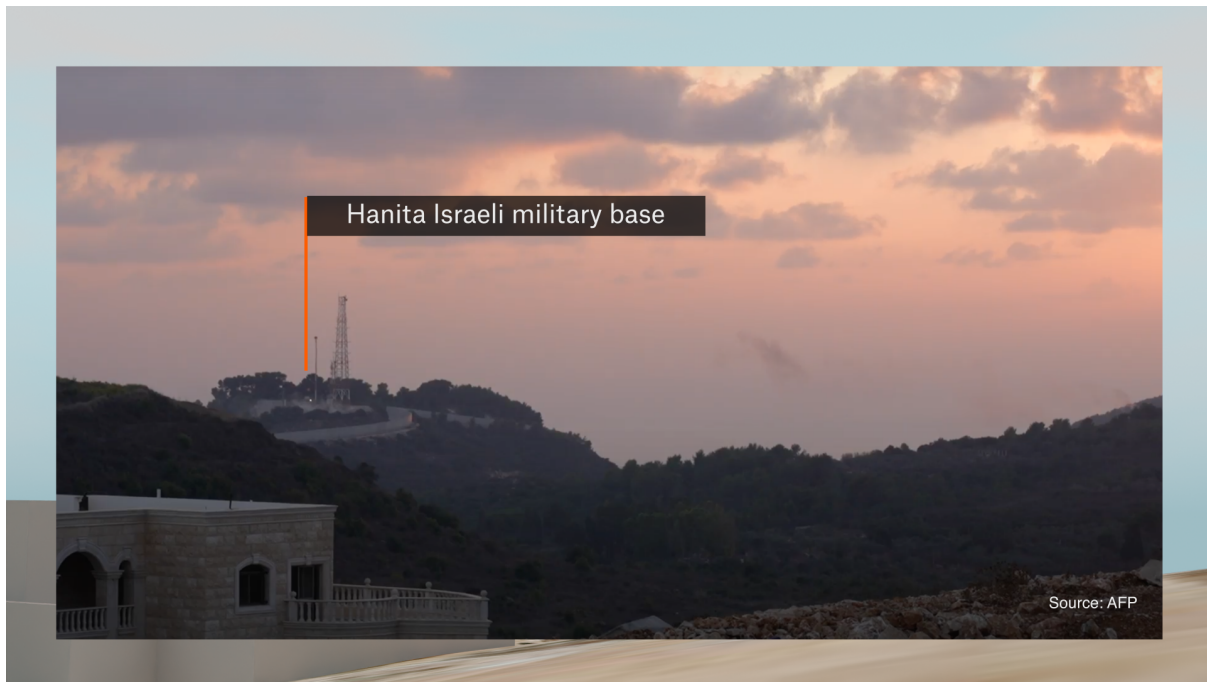
AFP filmed its first footage from that location at 17:05, both AFP and Reuters went live from the same spot, the two crews training their cameras southwards, according to accounts from all surviving members of the group, as well as time stamps from the cameras and live feed archives.

At 17:15, the sound of a strike is audible. Both cameras turned towards the southeast. AFP's camera filmed what appeared to be smoke from an outgoing strike from Israeli territory towards Lebanon, and the Reuters camera filmed the location where the shell apparently landed in Lebanon. This strike was the closest to the journalists of any of those in the period before the eventual strike, geolocated to around 1 km away from them (illustration above).



During the half hour running up to the deadly strike (18:02), the sound of approximately 25 different strikes of varying intensities can be heard in the audio files of the cameras, none of them close to the journalists. The hum of drones can be heard most of the time, a common occurrence in the area, especially when military activity is under way.

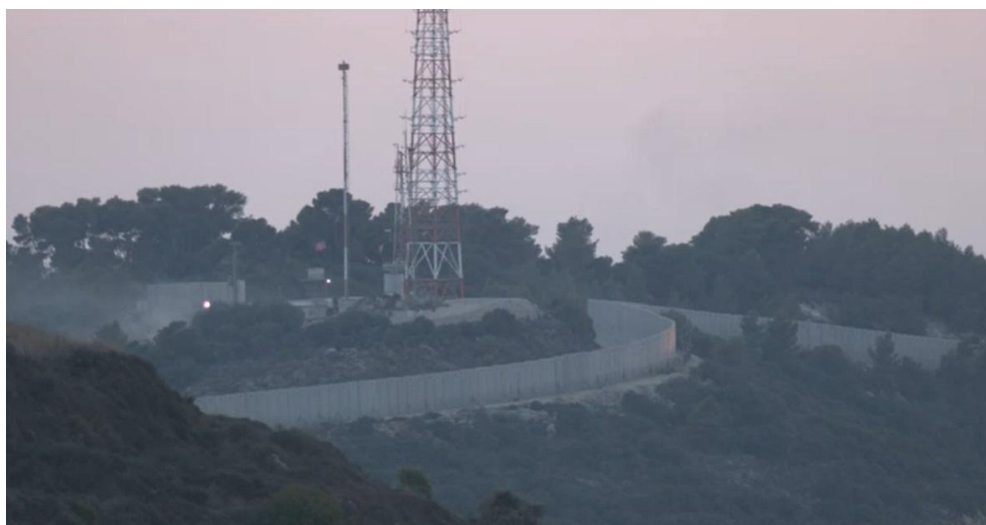
At 17:59, the journalists noticed smoke rising across the valley to the west and started filming in that direction, including the Hanita Israeli military position.



At 18:00, AFP footage shows a wide shot of the valley, with the Hanita base in the distance. Forty-six seconds into the video, what experts say is a tank round is fired from Hanita towards southwestern Lebanon. The impact site is not visible in the frame nor was it visible to the journalists because of the hills precluding the view. Thirty-eight seconds later, the sound of small arms fire can be heard on the cameras' audio files. It lasts three seconds, stops, then starts again with a higher frequency for 10 seconds. It stops shortly before the first strike that hits the journalists.

The exact location of the small arms fire could not be exactly determined but the journalists in the group initially assessed it to be around a kilometre away. An audio analysis by a military expert concluded it was at least several hundred metres away.

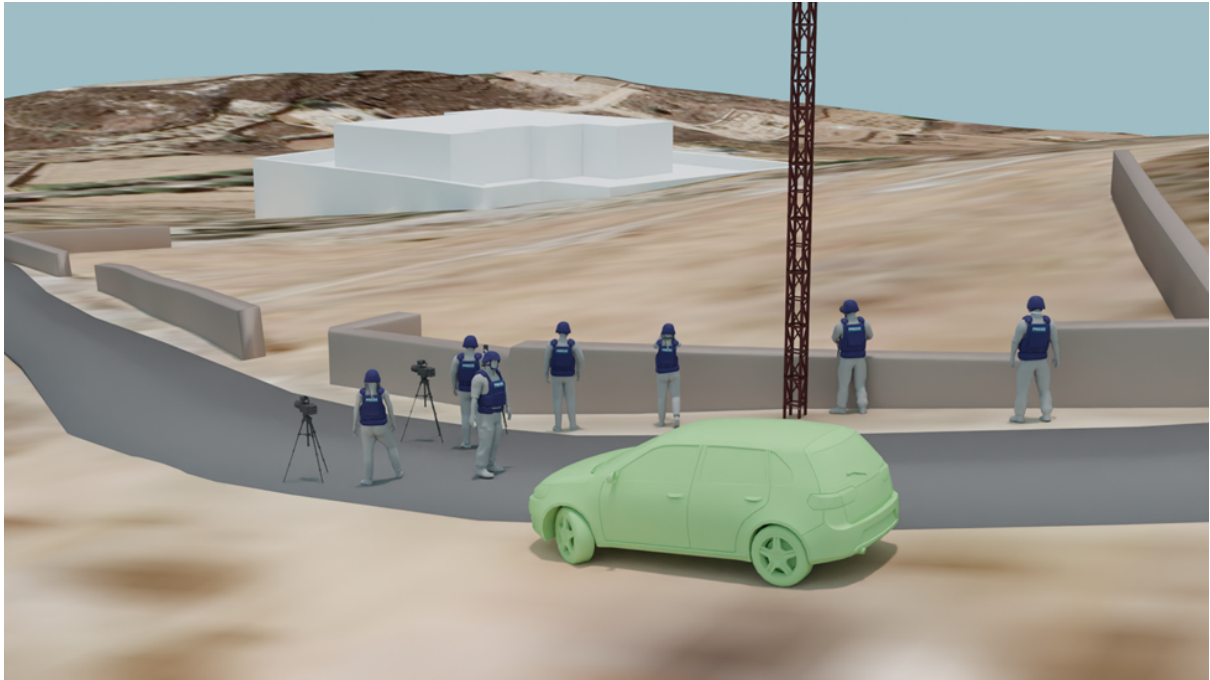
The Reuters live feed shows the same sequence and zooms in on Hanita. A careful examination of the footage shows the tank that fired the round changing position.



(© Reuters)

The first strike

The first strike hit the reporters at 18:02 and 14 seconds, according to the time stamps in the phone Dylan Collins was also using to film at that moment.



(© Airwars)

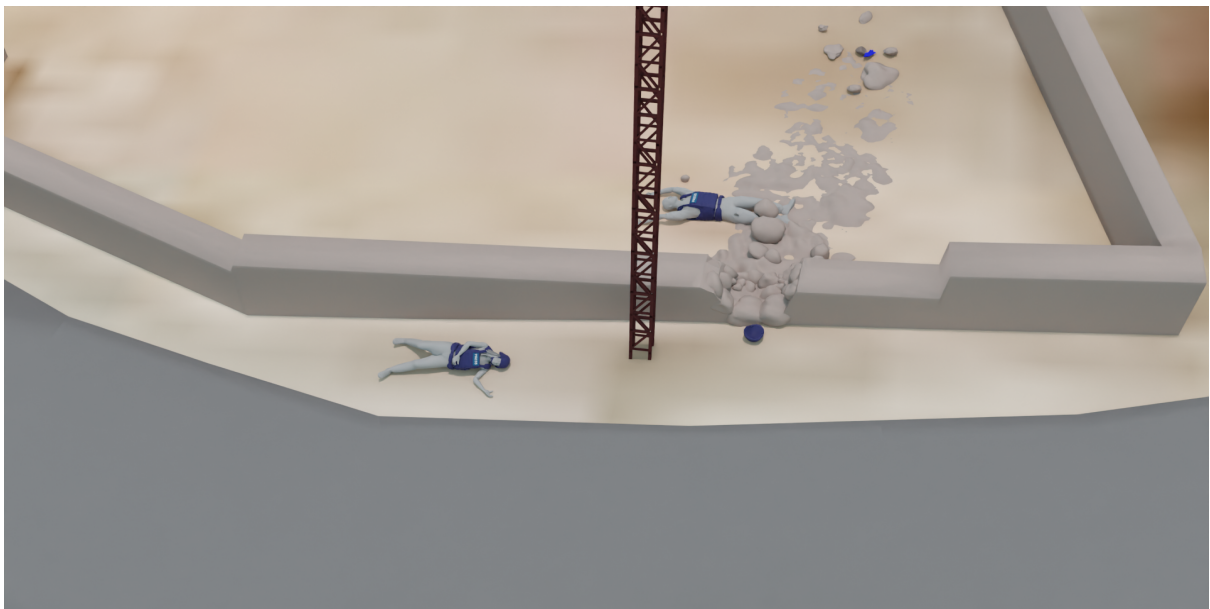
Right to left: Thaer Al-Sudani (Reuters), Issam Abdallah (Reuters), Christina Assi (AFP), Maher Nazeh (Reuters), Elie Brakhya (Al Jazeera, back), Dylan Collins (AFP, front left), Carmen Joukhadar (Al Jazeera).

Above is an approximate reconstitution of how the journalists were standing at the time of the first strike, according to their witness accounts, camera footage and angles. The first strike appears to have come from behind and hit the wall along which the journalists were lined up. Reuters journalist Issam Abdallah was standing directly against the wall and was killed instantly.



(© Airwars)

Footage and still images of the aftermath are too graphic to print but his body was thrown over the wall and lay among the stones from the damaged wall.



(© Airwars)

To Issam Abdallah's left, AFP photographer Christina Assi was hit in her legs and was lying on the ground. In the footage from a camera whose tripod was not tipped

over by the blast, she is heard calling for help and screaming that she cannot feel her legs.

Next to Abdallah's body, a large munition fragment is visible in footage (bottom left corner of the picture below) shot by another TV channel that arrived on the scene immediately after the blast.



(Top © AlJadeed, bottom © Airwars)

The fragment seen in the footage, as explained in the Airwars 3D model, was found and photographed the next day. AFP obtained the pictures, which were submitted by Airwars to several world-renowned munitions experts.

The angle at which the wall fragments were spread also strongly suggests that the strike came from the east.



(© AFP)

The pictures were analysed by five experts consulted by Airwars. All of them confirmed it was the tail fin assembly of a 120mm tank round, likely fired by an Israeli Merkava 3 or 4 tank. Please refer to the munitions analysis section for more details.

The second strike

A second strike occurred 37 seconds later and struck the Al-Jazeera vehicle just four to five metres away from the impact point of the first strike.

Dylan Collins described the scene: “When we were struck the first time I saw Christina on the ground, I immediately ran to her, and she was screaming that she couldn’t feel her legs. I had two tourniquets with me.”

“My plan was to put tourniquets on both legs, so I bent down, I got her left leg in front of me, took the first tourniquet off my vest and shook it open, I got it up to her knee, and we were hit the second time,” Collins said.

The impact spun the Al Jazeera vehicle and set it ablaze. It also apparently caused a crater, which is visible in pictures close to where the car was initially parked.

Before second strike:



(© Airwars)

After the second strike:



(©Airwars)

The car was clearly impacted on its front left side.



(© AFP)

Footage of the ensuing chaos shot by news channels LBCI, Al-Jadeed and Al-Araby shows the area where the journalists had been standing engulfed in flames.



(© AlJadeed)



(© AFP)

Analysis of the angles by the experts Airwars consulted suggests that the strike came in a low angle from the east, hit the front left side of the vehicle, making the car turn, before hitting the centre of the road where the impact crater is.



Dylan Collins, Elie Brakhya, Carmen Joukhadar and Thaer al-Sudani said they experienced the moment as a single explosion, not as a strike that caused a fire which subsequently made the car explode.

One expert also pointed out that the second strike directly hit the car's engine, which is typically the primary target when aiming for a car. This indicates a deliberate effort to target the vehicle. Examining the angles of the two strikes, it is possible that the first strike was intended to hit the car but missed, with the second strike subsequently finding its mark, the same expert said.

"If you are going to hit a car, you always do an engine shot," said a former British military Lieutenant Colonel, who asked to remain anonymous.

The similarity in the angles of the two strikes suggests that they may have originated from the same position, according to analysis gathered by Airwars.

However, other evidence indicates that the second strike may not have been caused by a tank round. In photos of the second strike's crater, several items are visible that could potentially be munitions remnants.



Experts could not provide definitive details on the munition used in the second strike based on the visual evidence provided by AFP. Some pointed out that the remnants appear to be of a different type of metal than that examined for the first strike. Others point to the fact that the metal appears to be thicker than what they would expect to see fired from a tank.

Lebanese military sources have said that their preliminary finding was that both strikes were caused by 120mm tank rounds but none of the experts consulted by Airwars and AFP were able to rule out a different munition being used, including the type that can be fired by drones and helicopters.

Prior to the double strike, journalist testimonies and analysis of the cameras' audio files reveal an increase in the sound of drones. Multiple arms experts said these are likely surveillance drones, as combat drones rarely approach closely enough to be heard before a strike.

Munitions analysis

Airwars shared the evidence available to AFP with six arms experts, who all confirmed that the remnant from the first strike discussed above is from a fin-stabilised 120mm tank round.

Below are some of the replies they gave, most of them asking to remain anonymous:

A former British military official:

- What was fired on Oct 13 at the journalists were tank rounds - the type used by a Merkava.
- The direction of the wall collapse gives a clear understanding that the strike came from behind the journalists.
- The second strike is a frighteningly accurate shot on the engine block of the car. If you are going to hit a car, you always do an engine shot. This tells me the car was the target, and that the drones were kept above to watch the impact.

A munitions expert who has investigated attacks across the globe:

- This was a high-velocity shell fired from the main armament of a battle tank. The calibre appears to be 120 mm, and the shell is fin-stabilised.
- The maximum effective range is five kilometres, but a skilled tank crew member should be able to hit a target the size of a car.
- Anyone suggesting that this is a misfire or an error would have a significant burden of proof.

Multiple arms experts narrowed down the number of possible models used to three, all of them Israeli-manufactured and of 120mm calibre and equipped with the same tail fins that can be fired from Merkava 3 and 4 tanks.

Chris Cobb-Smith, a leading arms expert, security consultant and former artillery officer in the British army, also clearly identified the remnant from the first strike as a fin-stabilised Merkava round.

Cobb-Smith has collected photos of remnants across many conflict areas over the years, including the Middle East. He recognised the remnant as very similar to fragments he collected during the 2009 war between the Israeli army and Palestinian groups and provided one of those pictures to Airwars (picture below).



An image of comparable munitions from 2009. © Chris Cobb-Smith

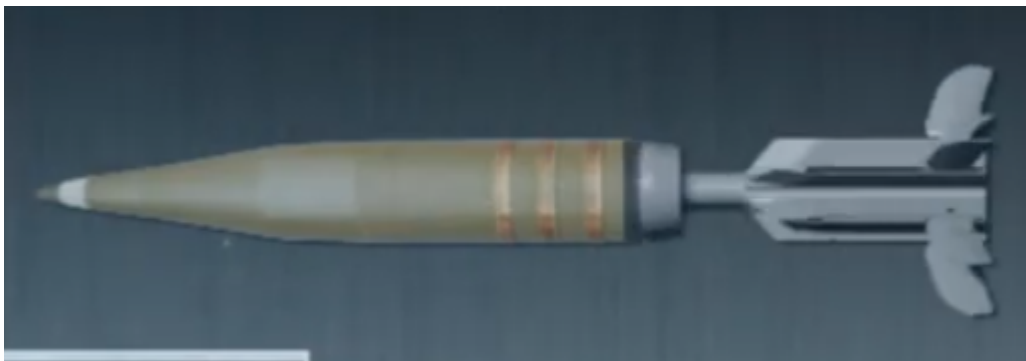
“A Merkava does not use guided munitions, but it is very accurate. Merkava will always have its target in line of sight. This can be within five to six kilometres but its sights are superb,” Cobb-Smith said.



(Left © ChrisCobb-Smith, right ©AFP)

For comparison, left, a fragment of the round photographed by Cobb-Smith in 2009, after a large Israeli military operation in the Gaza Strip. Right, the fragment found near Issam Abdallah's body.

The image below is taken from a promotional video for one of the three, very similar Israeli-manufactured tank rounds identified by experts as having likely been used on October 13.



Direction of first strike

To support the identification of the munition used in the first strike, it is important to try to understand where exactly it was fired from. The tank round blew fragments from the wall around 8-10 metres to the west.

Pictures and videos of the aftermath show the debris pattern, at the end of which the remnant was found.



(© SBI, [Sawt Beirut International](#))

The direction of the blast pattern suggests clearly that the strike came from behind the journalists. Several ballistic experts contacted by AFP and Airwars confirmed the finding.

Cobb-Smith said that it is possible to deduce roughly the direction from which the round was fired by extrapolating from the debris pattern.



(© Airwars)

That means the fire did not come from what the journalists were filming at the time of the strike. Their cameras were trained on Hanita, straight across to the south, from which the Israeli military was striking targets on hills in Lebanon further to the west.

“A vital clue came from analysis of the footage from the different news organisations. Around 45 minutes before the journalists were hit, AFP and Reuters cameras captured the sound of a strike which prompted the videographers from both organisations to point their cameras southeast,” Airwars said.

The Reuters camera captured what appeared to be smoke from the target in Lebanon while the AFP camera recorded what appeared to be the outgoing smoke from Israeli territory.

Airwars geolocated the smoke captured by the AFP camera as originating from an area near the Israeli village of Jordeikh. As illustrated in the graphic below, the location hit in Lebanon lies roughly at the halfway point on a line towards the reporters, which suggests that the Israeli army was firing in the same broad direction. The Israeli munition hit an area about one kilometre from the journalists.



(© Airwars)

Satellite imagery

AFP and Airwars sought satellite imagery of the area to verify Israeli tank presence in and around Jordeikh.

The US generally prohibits the sale of the highest-resolution imagery of Israel by American-based companies, and other governments have similar restrictions. However, Airwars obtained two lower resolution satellite images of the area around Jordeikh from that day via the satellite image providers SkyFi and Planet.

Airwars was able to identify armoured vehicles in the area by their shape and dimensions. The first image, captured at 11:06 by Planet, showed the presence of at least one armoured vehicle very near to the estimated origin of the strike.

In the second image at 14:21, by SkyFi, less than four hours before the journalists were hit, a military vehicle is seen just 30 metres from the area where Airwars estimated the 17:15 firing could have come from.

The resolution of the images is not high enough to ascertain that the military vehicles observed are Merkava tanks but they are of similar dimensions.

An audio analysis conducted by Human Rights Watch, which also carried out an in-depth investigation into the October 13 strikes, examined the muzzle fire sound in the footage recorded by AFP, Reuters and channels stationed nearby.

It concluded that the shots came from a distance of 1.45 to 1.8 kilometres. The object captured in the satellite image is 1.62 kilometres away.

Another image provided by Planet showed that two similar vehicles were present at the same location the next day. And another provided by SkyFi also shows a military vehicle in the same location.



(Powered by SATELLOGIC (c) 2023. Delivered by SkyFi)

Those findings support eyewitness accounts collected by AFP and HRW of two residents who said they saw fire originating from the Jordeikh area in the direction of where the journalists were standing at the time of the deadly strike.

Possible targets?

Journalists working in conflict areas can sometimes get caught in crossfire or be considered “legitimate” targets by some belligerents if they are “embedded” with an armed unit.

On October 13, the seven journalists were not travelling with any non-civilian personnel and were clearly recognisable as journalists. They were wearing the blue body armour typically used by journalists, their equipment was clearly marked “press”, their cameras and tripods in view.

AFP spoke to witnesses, security and military sources in Lebanon and analysed all the images it could find to look for signs of activity that could explain a misfire on a nearby target or make the journalists look suspicious to the Israeli military.

Interviews with the journalists all converged to say that no member of the group heard or saw any shooting or movement in the immediate vicinity suggesting they were standing close to a potential target.

The small arms fire mentioned earlier in this report was assessed to have originated several hundred metres away from the group of reporters.

The journalists picked the spot because it was an open area where they would be standing in plain view, a good vantage point from which to open their tripods and set up their cameras.

Besides Hezbollah, which de facto controls Lebanon’s entire southern border with Israel, Palestinian and pro-Palestinian armed factions based in Lebanon have been active in the area since October 7.

Among them are fighters from the armed wings of Hamas and the Palestinian group Islamic Jihad, as well as smaller groups such as Al-Fajr (Dawn), which is the armed wing of Jamaa al-Islamiya, the Lebanese branch of the Muslim Brotherhood.

While these groups have attempted infiltrations into Israel since October 7, the open area where the journalists were standing would have been an unlikely path for armed men trying to approach the Blue Line unnoticed.

There are no wooded areas in the immediate vicinity that could provide cover to militant groups and no military sites or positions.

"I have known this hill since 2006," Al Jazeera's Elie Brakhya told AFP. "It is not covered in trees, it cannot be seen as suspicious. It would be difficult to have any military site there. It is a hill with two houses, nothing can be hidden there."

AFP's Collins has no doubt that the Israelis knew they were journalists.

"I think from the moment that we arrived, the Israelis knew we were there," he said. "We were exposed to several Israeli positions along the border, to the west and the east. They had drones in the air the entire time, they could probably see our faces."

"We were in an exposed area, all of us wearing our helmets, our vests, just doing our job... and we were maintaining safe distance from the front line," AFP's Christina Assi said.

Chris Cobb-Smith argued that Israel's advanced surveillance capabilities left little doubt that the journalists' presence on that hill would have been noticed and investigated.

"As the IDF (Israeli Defence Forces) forces were actively engaged at the time, it is reasonable to expect that the area would be under continual surveillance," he told AFP.

"The newsgathering teams had been at that location for some time, were static, were wearing distinctive blue PPE (personal protective equipment) and obviously unarmed. I would expect the reporters to have been fully visible to the IDF and that they did not present any form of threat," he said.

All journalists reported the almost continuous presence of drones overhead during the hour preceding the strikes, as evidenced by the audio from their cameras.

"A UAV (unmanned aerial vehicle) would not only have located them, but with advanced surveillance capabilities, they would easily be identified as media and therefore not a legitimate target," Cobb-Smith said.

Ramzi Kaiss, Lebanon researcher at HRW, led a parallel investigation into the strikes and confirmed the drone presence.

"What our investigation has also shown is that relying on the analyses from audio experts that HRW has consulted, there was a UAV that had circled near the journalists location approximately 11 times in the last 25 mins before they were struck," he told AFP.

In the absence of a military target, the fact that the same spot was hit twice in quick succession rules out a misfire.

"It is most unlikely that this was a misfire or error. It may be likely that the first round missed the vehicle hence the firing of the a second shell which achieved its purpose," said Desmond Travers, a former Irish Army colonel who has also worked as a UN investigator and as the director of the Institute for International Criminal Investigations in the Hague has worked for decades on munitions analysis.

Amnesty International's investigation found the journalists had taken all necessary precautions to identify themselves.

"The Israeli military either knew or should have known that the seven individuals were journalists, and yet they still targeted them not once but twice, and therefore Amnesty is saying this is likely a direct attack on civilians and must be investigated as a war crime," Aya Majzoub, Amnesty's deputy regional director for the Middle East, told AFP.



(© Hassan Ammar / AP)

HRW reached similar conclusions.

"Our investigation found that the journalists were clearly identifiable as members of the press, they were well removed from areas of ongoing hostilities," Kaiss said.

"So we found that these two strikes are an apparent war crime because the journalists were likely deliberately attacked or the strikes were likely a deliberate attack on civilians," he told AFP.

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In memoriam

Issam Abdallah (1986 - 2023)



(© Reuters)

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