

## **Iraqi Journalists Demand Protection**

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Atwar Bhajat was not the first journalist to have been killed in Iraq, but her murder has shaken many of her colleagues.

The last time Atwar Bahjat, correspondent for al-Arabiya news channel, appeared on air was just a few hours before her kidnapping and murder.

Atwar wore a green dress and a gold necklace of the map of Iraq as she broadcast from Samarra, her hometown and where the Askari shrine, holy to Shias, had been bombed. Atwar frequently reported on the bloody turmoil afflicting Iraq and ultimately became one of its victims.

Her bullet-ridden body and those of two of her colleagues were discovered shortly after the broadcast on February 22, only two kilometres away from a checkpoint where she had conducted interviews. A few days later, her funeral was attacked.

Atwar, who was 26, is not the first journalist to have been killed in Iraq, but her murder has shaken many Iraqi journalists who were already concerned about their safety. The Committee for the Protection of Journalists in Iraq, a Baghdad-based organisation, reports that 60 journalists - the vast majority of whom were Iraqi - have been killed since Saddam Hussein's regime was ousted in April 2003.

"The death of blessed Atwar touched our souls," said Ahmed al-Salih, an al-Arabiya correspondent in Iraq and Atwar's colleague. He said the station has lost 11 of its Iraqi staff since the conflict began.

"I am not going to cover any event anywhere in Iraq," al-Salih went on. "There is no protection and no one has offered to help us carry out our jobs."

"It deeply impacted me," said Santa Michael, correspondent for Ashur satellite channel in Baghdad, referring to Atwar's death. "The situation in Iraq is very difficult for reporters, especially for foreigners and anyone who works with them."

International journalists' rights organisations consider Iraq the most dangerous country in the world to report from. They say reporters here face security threats from insurgents, US troops and Iraqi forces.

But the condemnation of these organisations does little to ease the fears of journalists, who believe they are easy targets. They are pushing to raise awareness of their plight by creating a stronger support network for families of endangered journalists and by making February 22, the day Atwar was killed, a national day honouring martyred Iraqi reporters.

Iraq journalists often carry guns when they report and hide their faces from cameras in press conferences so they cannot be publicly identified. Some Iraqi journalists say the deteriorating security situation is making even street reporting difficult, a practice most foreign counterparts in Iraq gave up on due to security concerns.

"We are witnessing a catastrophe for journalism as media organisations are forced to pull their people off the streets," Aidan White, general-secretary of the International Federation of Journalists, said in a statement issued after Atwar's death. "It is impossible to have independent coverage when media staff are being gunned down in this brutal conflict."

Michael said she often wears conservative Islamic dress when she covers religious areas, a tactic used by Jill Carroll, the 28-year-old Christian Science Monitor freelance reporter who was seized by gunmen on January 7. Iraqi interior minister Bayan Jabr said this week he believed Carroll is still alive, although the deadline set by her captors for the US to meet their demands expired on February 23.

Journalism organisations are also lobbying for the release of two kidnapped Iraqi journalists, Rim Zeid and Marwan Khazaal, of Sumariya TV.

Because of the worsening security situation in Baghdad and many other provinces, the number of foreign correspondents has decreased. The abduction and murder of several reporters has forced foreign agencies to depend on local reporters with less experience.

"The dependence on local reporters has led to less powerful material," said Michael. "It has hurt neutrality and professionalism because Iraqi reporters are viewing events through their ethnic or sectarian affiliations."

Many cases of abuse against journalists by Iraqi forces have been reported. Huda Jasim, head of Baghdad office for Asharq al-Awsat Arabic newspaper, said security officials arrested one of her colleagues and two Agence France Presse reporters after they published statements by the US Ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, that were critical of Iraqi interior minister Bayan Jabur al-Zubaidi.

Ibrahim al-A'araji, a member of the Committee for the Protection of Journalists in Iraq, said the organisation will push for strong laws to protect their members. It is also trying to establish a programme to support journalists and their families in several dangerous provinces like Diyala, Basra, Karbala and Mosul.

He said it planned to set up a fund for families of murdered or kidnapped journalists "but we have zero support from the Iraqi government".

A'araji agreed with the assertion by other reporters that the government is not transparent and does not respect journalists - who complain they are often stonewalled by ministries after writing about sensitive issues such as corruption.

Iraq is being deprived of "a true democratic process", said A'araji, "and journalism is part of it."

Zaineb Naji is an IWPR trainee journalist in Baghdad.

**Location:** [Iraqi Kurdistan](#)  
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