

Iraqis Mourn Ammar Al Shahbander

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After an emotional farewell, colleagues reflect on his contribution in life.

Weeping and reciting prayers for the soul of the man they loved and respected, Iraqi politicians, journalists, civil society activists, friends, colleagues and family gathered in Baghdad on May 4 to see Ammar Al Shahbander set off to his final resting-place in the holy city of Najaf.

At nine in the morning, the coffin was placed in a vehicle which set off at walking pace towards Karrada's main street where buses were waiting to accompany it to Najaf's great cemetery. The crowd of dignitaries and colleagues walked alongside, together with Ammar's relatives. His father Ghalib Hasan Al Shahbander kept hugging the coffin, a scene that provoked many to tears.

On the evening of May 2, Ammar and two friends had been walking down a street in the Karrada Dakhil area of downtown Baghdad. Just five metres away from them, a parked car packed with explosives detonated.

Ammar was killed; so were 14 other civilians. Emad al-Sharaa, who worked with Ammar at IWPR's Baghdad office, was badly injured, and is still in danger from shrapnel in his head.

"For less than a second, I saw the car glowing red and then I saw it blow up," Emad said from his hospital bed. "The explosion threw me several metres, and a cloud of smoke covered the area."

Holding a picture of Ammar, civil activist Mustafa Saad was in Baghdad as the funeral cortege moved off.

"It was a huge shock to me when I read news of his death on a website," he said. "He was the best manager I ever worked with. He always treated us as friends and listened to our opinions seriously.

"We've just lost a great man who cannot be replaced."

In Karrada, the security forces blocked off the main road because of the number of mourners as four buses set off to accompany the coffin to Najaf.

Along the way, the cortege came to a halt many times over to allow local officials and tribal leaders to offer their condolences.

In Najaf, governor Adnan al-Zurfi met the convoy and placed an Iraqi flag over the coffin. The mourners went to the shrine of Imam Ali for final prayers, and then on to the cemetery for the interment.

For many, the mourning was an opportunity to share personal memories of Ammar.

"I have known Ammar since 2006, and ever since that first day, I was drawn to his professional manner, but even more by his genuinely Iraqi nature. He was very much aware of what Iraqis needed," said Shatha al-Abusi, an adviser to the speaker of the Iraqi parliament.

She recalled their last conversation, a phone call late on the night before Ammar's death. They talked about arranging help for families displaced from Anbar in western Iraq.

"He told me, 'I will arrange something within 48 hours'," Abusi said.

Her voice still weakened by the shock of the news, she said, "I have lost Ammar, I have lost my brother."

Hazim al-Sharaa, now chief editor of the satellite TV channel al-Sumaria, was among the first Iraqi journalists trained by IWPR.

He agrees with the many who say Ammar's death constitutes an irreplaceable loss, but argues that he will live on through the efforts he made for his fellow-Iraqis.

Sharaa sees Ammar as a pioneer of building a new kind of journalism in Iraq, a programme of work that turned out many solid, professional journalists.

"Ammar's priority was to produce a new generation of journalists who'd be able to support the newborn democracy in Iraq," he said. "His projects created opportunities for dozens of media workers to acquire real professional training.

"Ammar came with Western media standards and explained them for the Iraqi context. That was

something special.”

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