

## **Journalists in Firing Line**

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At least 15 reporters are said to have been killed this year, but the real number could be higher.

Mahdi al-Kadhmi, along with three other Iraqi journalists, was waiting in his car at a traffic light in Baaquoba when a pickup truck and a Volkswagen Golf stopped next to them.

Then gunmen opened fire and killed everyone except Kadhmi.

Later the same day, March 18, a US military spokesperson confirmed that US forces had shot and mortally wounded two other reporters from the Dubai-based al-Arabiya satellite news station at a checkpoint in Baghdad.

The Committee to Protect Journalists, a human rights organisation based in New York, issued a statement that day stressing the dangers reporters face in Iraq, which include "bomb attacks, shootings, car-jackings and hold-ups".

Estimates vary of the number of journalists killed in Iraq over the past year. The World Association of Newspapers puts the figure at 15, more than 25 per cent of the international total.

But the number could be even higher as many deaths of local journalists sometimes go unnoticed by the outside world.

In the case of Kadhmi and his colleagues, who all worked for the US-funded Iraqi TV station Diyala, the shootings were part of a coordinated effort at intimidation.

"Two days before, they sent a letter," Kadhmi says, referring to the assassins. "We found it, all four of us, in our garden in the morning... It said that 'if you don't stop working for the Americans, we will kill you'."

While acknowledging his work for the station, Kadhmi said it was a matter of necessity in order to earn money.

"We have to work with the Americans. We don't have any money," the journalist said. "We know this is an occupation, but [the job] is money."

While the murders of Kadhmi's colleagues were noted by the outside world, the deaths of other reporters who work for local papers often receive little if any publicity at all.

Journalist Hussein Abbas of the local Sawt al-Mujtamaa newspaper was shot dead in the north Baghdad neighbourhood of al-Adhamiya on December 13. He was covering street protests that broke out after the capture of former president Saddam Hussein.

According to a local police officer, who preferred not to give his name, Abbas had gone over from the

protestors to interview US troops and was apparently shot by the former as he returned to their lines.

"They thought he was a spy for the Americans or Mossad," the police source said.

Journalists even face the hostility of the police, in addition to the risks they run from insurgents, foreign soldiers, common criminals and ordinary citizens.

Two days after the death of Abbas, journalist Ameen al-Ani was arrested in al-Adhamiya for speaking to demonstrators. "No one supports journalists," he said, adding that "even the police dislike us".

But the police have a different story to tell of Ani.

He was "provoking demonstrators, and interfering with the work of the police," said Adhamiya officer Ahmed Hareth. "Journalists hinder our work."

Iraqi journalists say the dangers are compounded by Iraq's lawlessness, in which perpetrators of crimes are seldom brought to justice.

Mahdi al-Taee, Abbas's colleague at the newspaper, said, "Journalists have no rights in Iraq. Hussein [Abbas] was gone just like that, and the murderer has never been punished."

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