

## **New Wave of Violence Against Journalists**

**Author:** [Shawkat al-Bayati](#)

Media groups are calling for increased protection for journalists following series of attacks. Iraqi journalists have faced a fresh bout of violence in recent weeks, which is seen by some observers as a renewed attempt to undermine free media in the country.

Since last month, at least five media workers have been killed and several others injured.

Earlier this week, Dyar Abas Ahmed, a Kurdish journalist, was gunned down in the northern city of Kirkuk, according to the New-York-based Committee to Protect Journalists, CPJ.

On September 13, three journalists and their driver were killed while filming a show in Mosul.

Senior correspondent with al-Sharqiya TV Musab Mahmood al-Ezawi and cameramen Ahmed Salim and Ihab Mu'd and their driver Qaydar Sulaiman were reportedly kidnapped while their fellow crew members were inside a house filming.

Their bodies were later found in the al-Borsa district, close to the site from where they were taken.

On September 20, the head of the Iraq journalists' union Muaid Al-Lami was injured, along with four other journalists, in an explosion at the union's headquarters in Baghdad.

According to reports, the bomb exploded at the entrance to the building in the al-Waziriya neighbourhood, in the north of the capital.

Following the attack, the Iraqi Committee to Protect Journalists, ICPJ, demanded the authorities provide better safeguards for members of the journalists' union. Its members, it said, were being targeted by extremists trying to silence the voices of the free press and media.

Head of the Iraqi Association for Journalists' Rights Ibrahim Al-Sarai, meanwhile, asked the government to lay on security for the head and council members of the union, who he said were the targets of unknown political or extremist groups.

This is not the first time the union has been attacked.

In February this year, its chair, Shihab al-Tamimi, died after being shot in Baghdad. Head of the union since 2003, Tamimi had been a critic of the US invasion of Iraq and of the continued occupation of the country by American forces.

Since 2003, such assassinations and kidnappings in Iraq have been rife.

The country is regarded as the most dangerous place in the world for journalists. According to CPJ, 135 journalists have been killed in Iraq since 2003.

While media workers seem to have been a particular target, the Iraqi government refused to acknowledge this, saying that their deaths were a result of the general wave of violence that engulfed the country.

Journalists' union member Husein Fawzi, who writes for several local papers, said that before the recent attacks on journalists, the security situation in Iraq had greatly improved.

"[Until recently] conditions for journalists and media workers were relatively good, but now we are seriously thinking of quitting our work," said Fawzi.

Rawhi Ahmed, who works as programme manager at Radio al-Mahabba, an Iraqi station devoted to women's issues, blamed terrorists and armed groups for the targeting of journalists.

He said that responsibility ultimately lay with the government and security forces for failing to prevent the attacks, and hold the perpetrators accountable.

"If the government investigated the killing of journalists and punished those responsible, things would completely change and the journalists would be safe," he said.

He asserted that politicians do not seem concerned about the safety of media workers, noting that a law to protect journalists is stalled in parliament.

Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, who has condemned the killing of journalists but whose government has been criticised for not doing enough to protect them, sent the draft law to parliament. Little is known about the law, which was reportedly presented to the parliament's culture and media committee over the summer, but has not been made public.

"The bill the government presented to parliament guarantees the protection of journalists and considers them an important part of Iraqi society," government spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh told IWPR.

Ziad al-Ajili, who heads the Iraqi media rights group Journalistic Freedom Observatory, JFO, said the legislation would require the government to support the families of journalists who had been killed and would pay for the medical treatment of those who are injured.

Journalists' union member and news editor at Al-Yom Radio Eman al-Khattab said the draft law should have been introduced earlier. She maintained that Tamimi's killing and the recent targeting of the journalist's union were politically-motivated and called for an independent investigation into the recent spike in violence against journalists.

In response to the attacks, the JFO said it has launched a project with the interior ministry to protect

journalists by supplying them with maps and giving them escorts when reporting on certain events. The interior ministry will also provide journalists with helmets, flack jackets and first-aid kits.

Ajili said the initiative is part of a larger project being carried out in cooperation with non-governmental organisation Iraqi Independent Media to provide better protection and security.

Interior ministry public relations and media office manager Alaa al-Taaee said the ministry was ready to provide everything necessary to support the work of journalists.

“We have a clear vision from the very beginning, and we want to develop it in a project with any organisation caring about journalistic affairs. The project is unprecedented at regional and international level,” he said.

In a separate initiative, IWPR is soon to launch a safety course for journalists in Iraq, called Safety and Security and Legal Protection. The course will introduce the western model of hostile environment training to journalists in the country. It will also provide training on media law.

Shawkat Al-Bayati is an IWPR-trained journalist in Baghdad.

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