

Tribute to Arif Ali Flaih

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Violence claims IWPR reporter who helped establish a ground-breaking radio show on women's issues.



He loved to speak French. When Ari Ali Flaih, 32, first arrived at the IWPR training centre in Sulaimaniyah, he immediately tried out the international trainers' French. He had never been to France, but he was in love with the language and the country.

Flaih will never go to France. He was killed by a roadside bomb on June 11, 2007, when he was driving from Khalis to Hibhib, eight kilometers northwest of Baquba in the province of Diyala.

In Hibhib, al-Qaeda leader Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi was killed by an American airstrike a year earlier, in June 2006.

According to the news agency *Awsat al-Iraq* (Voices of Iraq), Flaih was on an assignment when the bomb went off. He suffered severe head injuries and died in hospital 30 minutes later.

The violence claimed a man who was always friendly, smiling and so infatuated with literature and culture that he inserted Kafka into his email address.

With his BA in French from Mustansiriyah University in Baghdad, he would have loved to work in the arts - but times and circumstances in his home country prevented him from doing so.

He took a different path that, step by step, led him into journalism. After the fall of the Saddam regime, he worked as a civil servant at the ministry of information - but soon commuting from his hometown Muqadiya in the province of Diyala to Baghdad became too dangerous, and he quit.

Translator jobs for newspapers and radio stations sparked his interest in journalism, and when he heard about an IWPR radio training course to be held in Sulaimaniyah in November 2005, he immediately applied.

The course, he said afterwards, changed his life. "The training made me more and more enthusiastic about journalism and introduced me to many journalists, politicians and intellectuals and it brought me closer to the miseries of people," he said. "It taught me to be neutral, impartial, honest and to convey the truth as it is."

With no previous radio or reporting experience, he showed such great talent that he became a regular contributor to the IWPR radio programme *The Other Half*, a show that focused on women's issues in Iraq.

Flaih reported on women and education in the volatile Diyala province, analysed the picture Iraqi media paint of women, solicited their views on religion and interviewed those with ambitions in politics.

Journalists in Baquba, the capital of Diyala, often hide their identities for security reasons, making it difficult for the public to reach them when they have an important issue to discuss. But because Flaih openly worked as a journalist, he said many of his sources contacted him time and time again to follow up on stories.

Flaih found that women, who are largely marginalised in Iraqi society, were particularly grateful to be given a voice. IWPR, he once told us, is one of the first media outlets to provide them with an opportunity to express their views.

He was very proud of the reports, which according to him have significantly influenced his community.

In July 2006, he was hired by the International Institute for Human Rights to conduct interviews for the Iraq History Project that gathers and analyses personal narratives from victims, victims' families, witnesses, perpetrators and others regarding human rights violations committed during the Saddam era.

Flaih collected stories from victims in the villages of Diyala. Work that did not go unnoticed. He received threats from extremists operating in the area and decided to move to the Kurdish town of Kalar.

In late 2006, Flaih married, and together with his wife, he moved back to Diyala, to a small village near Khalis, 55 kilometres north of Baghdad.

The province of Diyala in general and the area around Khalis and Baquba in particular have turned into a

hotbed of insurgency and violence over the past year. Despite the risks, Flaih forged ahead with his journalistic work. He continued to report for IWPR and, in December 2006, started to work for the Iraqi news agency Awsat al-Iraq as their Diyala correspondent.

"The situation is out of control and the government exists only on satellite channels, while in reality the country is run by militias, linked to neighbouring states, who aim to destabilise Iraq," he said.

After narrowly escaping death at the hands of the militias, he began to restrict his movements and generally exercise greater caution. He said he was not sure he could put up with the pressure much longer.

"I've started to think about quitting journalism and look for a different job," he said. But he never did.

Arif Ali Flaih is survived by his wife and unborn child.

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