

IRAQ

For the last three years the escalation in numbers of killings of media staff can be traced to the continuing tragedy of Iraq. In the first weeks of 2007 the targeting of journalists reached new horrifying levels. The country has been the deadliest for journalists since the US invasion in 2003, and claimed at least 65 journalists and media staff in 2007, slightly down on the 69 who were killed during 2006. According to the Iraqi Union of Journalists Syndicate (IUJ), more than 273 journalists and media staff have died since 2003. Of those who died in 2007 all but one was an Iraqi national.

This painful experience was made tragically vivid on 27 February 2008, with the assassination of Shihab Al-Timimi, the President of the Iraqi Union of Journalists. This caused deep shock and pain for the Iraqi and international media community. Shihab, 75 succumbed to wounds sustained in a targeted attack by gunmen a few days earlier in Baghdad. The IFJ has challenged the Iraqi authorities to find the killers.

The IFJ also remains concerned over the lack of proper investigation into cases of media deaths at the hands of United States soldiers. Around 20 journalists and media staff have been killed by US troops since March 2003 and the IFJ has reiterated calls for an independent process of investigation and reporting. Currently, the US military carries out its own investigations and normally produces reports which, if they are published at all, are unconvincing and full of self justification.

In this state of occupation, civil and sectarian war, hundreds of newspapers and tens of broadcasters operated. Efforts to intervene to support Iraqi journalists included the establishment of a national safety programme in May 2007. The two IFJ affiliates in Iraq organised a meeting on security for Iraqi journalists. Hosted by the Kurdish Journalists' Syndicate (KJS) in Irbil, and co-organised with the IUJ, the meeting saw the launching of the Iraq Media Safety Group (IMSG) which brings together media representatives from throughout the country. Together with the International News Safety Institute (INSI) and the IFJ, the IMSG aims to develop a national safety plan for Iraqi journalists. The number of media killings in Iraq began to fall towards the end of the year as targeting by warring factions in the country's sectarian disputes began to subside raising hopes that new safety initiatives may see a downturn in the number of media killings.

The Iraqi Press law provides for up to seven years jail for publicly insulting the government, the national assembly or public authorities. It prohibits publishing stories that libel public officials and incitement to violence and civil disorder. In practice, the law is a powerful tool of intimidation used by the authorities to crack down on the few independent media left in the country.

In the region of Kurdistan, the KJS which works in a much more settled environment has a strong ability to work with journalists and exert influence on media legislation. It proposed a draft law to the Kurdish Parliament, but the latter passed a new media law which threatened imprisonment for journalists. The syndicate recorded a notable achievement, when its successful lobbying resulted in a Presidential veto in January 2008, forcing the Parliament to reconsider the bill.

In the first days of 2008, the IFJ sent an urgent mission to Baghdad to help develop and define the new programme with the different national stakeholders. The key conclusions of the mission's work are that while the threat of sectarian violence and terrorism remains, a corner is being turned in Iraq with fresh opportunities to promote independent journalism and to strengthen the work of journalists' unions. Media need to be encouraged to develop open and pluralistic public information, crucial if talk of a durable peace and reconciliation is to have any meaning.

► Cases

Name	Media	Position	Facts
Richard Butler	CBS	Reporter Interpreter	10.02.2008 The journalist and his interpreter were kidnapped from a hotel in Basra by unidentified gunmen. The interpreter was freed two days later and the journalist found safe on 14 April.

Abid Aref	Hawlati Weekly	Editor	01.02.2008 the editor was tried in Suleimaniyah, on defamation charges brought by President Jalal Talabani. The editor had criticised a number of Kurdish political figures in a report published two weeks earlier. He was freed after paying bail of €600. If convicted the journalist faces up to one year jail.
Rashid Majid Al-Sari	Al-Fatah	Editor	18.01.2008 Arrested by US military forces in Baghdad for unknown reasons. His newspaper, Al-Fatah, is backed by a Shiite party.
Fayçal Ghazala	Kolsat TV station	Correspondent	19.11.2007 Arrested in Mosul by Kurdish police and freed a month later, with no charges, after being questioned on his coverage of bombings in the region.
Mohammed Mazhar Al-Shaheen Al-Shumari	Al-Fayçal Weekly	Editor	17.11.2007 Released by US military forces, after having been arrested in October, in Tikrit without known charges.
Imad Al-Khaza'i	Al-Baghdadiyah Privately-owned TV station in Diwaniya	Correspondent	28.06.2007 , Was detained for several hours by Iraqi security forces for not respecting a ban on approaching the scene of a bombing. The ban was decreed last month by Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki.
▲ Rabiaa Abdul Wahab	Dar Al Salam Radio station	Journalist	26.10.2006 , the US army arrested the two journalists, for suspected links with armed groups.
▲ Ali Burhan	Dar Al Salam	Journalist	
Ahmad Hamas Obaidi	Dar Al Salam	Journalist	05.08.2006 , arrested at his Baghdad home, for suspected links with armed groups.
Bilal Hussein	The Associated Press	Freelance Photographer	12.04.2006 Taken into custody by US forces in Ramadi for "security reasons" and held on the accusation of involvement in the kidnapping of two journalists in Ramadi. Hussein shared a 2005 Pulitzer Prize with other AP photographers for work in Iraq. He was released on 16 April 2008, ending more than two years in U.S. military custody after Iraqi judges dropped all legal proceedings against him.

For further information see:

IFJ killed List 2007 www.ifj.org

IFJ Report mission to Iraq, January 2008 "Beyond the Violence, a Challenge to Journalism Emerges."

Iraqi Media Safety Group <http://www.iraqmsg.org/indexen.php>