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FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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Iraq

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Journalists in Iraq continued to face myriad challenges in 2012, the country's first year without a U.S. troop presence since the 2003 invasion. While no reporters were killed on the job—a major milestone after years in which the journalist death count had been among the world's worst—four media workers were killed under suspicious circumstances, and journalists continued to suffer threats and harassment amid poor legal protections for media freedom.

Iraq's constitution protects freedoms of speech and expression, but authorities continue to use the 1969 penal code to prosecute journalists for a variety of offenses, including libel and defamation. In 2010, the Supreme Judicial Council created a special court to prosecute journalists, despite a ban on the creation of special courts in Article 95 of the constitution. A new law passed in August 2011 established safeguards for free speech and provided benefits to journalists who are killed or injured. The legislation also eliminated a stipulation that media workers must belong to the journalists' union to be entitled to legal protections. While the law represented a positive step, media watchdog organizations criticized

it for failing to include concrete penalties for authorities who violate its provisions. Throughout 2012, the parliament debated a draft cybercrime bill that would severely restrict media freedom. If passed, the Information Technology Crimes Bill would impose harsh penalties, including life imprisonment and large fines, for use of the internet to commit crimes that “affect ... the unity of the country” or “its high economic, or political, or military, or security interests,” among other vaguely defined offenses. A second draft bill under consideration at year’s end, the Law on Freedom of Expression, Assembly, and Peaceful Protest, fails to protect the right to freedom of information, according to media watchdog groups.

The Iraqi media environment is heavily politicized. Since political factions and ethnic groups control many of the country’s news outlets, coverage of political events is often slanted toward a particular group’s agenda or beliefs. Self-censorship is also common, as many journalists fear repercussions for publishing critical remarks, especially those related to the government or political parties. In April 2012, the Communications and Media Commission—which oversees licensing of media outlets and may bar coverage deemed to be “an incitement to violence”—ordered security forces to shut down 44 local and foreign news outlets. The order was not immediately enforced, but two outlets—Al-Baghdadiya TV and Radio Al-Mahaba—were forced to close in December amid allegations that they had violated unspecified transmission rules and had not paid broadcasting fees. It was unclear whether those forced closures were related to the earlier order.

While no journalists were murdered as a result of their work in 2012, four media personnel were killed under circumstances that are still under investigation. In April, Kamiran Salaheddin, a news presenter on an Iraqi current-affairs program and the head of a local journalists’ union, was killed when a bomb hidden in his car exploded. Ghazwan Anas, also a news presenter for a local Iraqi television station, was shot to death in his home in July. In September, veteran journalist Farqad Hussein, the editor in chief of *Al-Adwa* newspaper, was killed in a car bomb explosion. In November, Samir al-Sheikh Ali, editor in chief of the daily *Al-Jamahir al-Baghdadiya*, was shot and killed by unidentified gunmen. Iraq topped the Committee to Protect Journalists’ Impunity Index for the fifth year in a row, with more than 90 murders of journalists remaining unsolved. Journalists continued to face arbitrary arrest by security forces, detention without trial, beatings, and confiscation of equipment during the year.

Security forces in the semiautonomous Kurdistan region arrested at least 50 journalists and political rights activists in 2012. Many of the journalists were detained while covering the first anniversary of protests that erupted in the region in March 2011, or for criticizing regional government officials, and at least seven have been prosecuted for criminal defamation or insult. Authorities in the region do not always respect the Kurdistan Press Law, which protects the right of journalists to obtain information “of importance to citizens” and “relevant to the public interest,” and requires officials to investigate and punish anyone who insults or injures a journalist as a result of his work. In 2012, no members of Asayish, the region’s internal security agency, were prosecuted for beating and detaining journalists. In October, independent journalist Karzam Karim was sentenced to two years in prison for reporting on suspected corruption in Kurdistan’s security forces; he had allegedly been tortured and beaten in detention. In September, a vaguely worded draft “Law to Protect Sanctities” was rejected by both the legal and the human rights committees in the regional parliament. The legislation had threatened to punish insults against religion or national symbols with up to 10 years in prison for individuals and the shutdown of offending media outlets. However, soon after the law was rejected, the top prosecutor reportedly asked officials to monitor media outlets for insults to religious or political leaders, and to report violations.

Hundreds of privately owned television, radio, and print media outlets have opened since 2003, producing content in Arabic, Kurdish, Syriac, Turkmen, and other languages. However, media are usually split along sectarian, ethnic, and political lines. Political parties and ethnic groups fund most outlets, and journalists often blur the distinction between news and opinion. The government controls the Iraqi Media Network, which includes Al-Iraqiya television and the newspaper *Al-Sabah*. The government also shapes the editorial content of some outlets by manipulating public advertising or pressuring private advertisers. Advertising with no editorial demands attached makes up only a small fraction of media outlets’ revenues. Satellite dishes are legal, and a majority of Iraqis have access to satellite news channels, including Al-Sharqiya, an Iraqi-owned station that broadcasts from Dubai; Qatar-based Al-Jazeera; and the Saudi-owned Al-Arabiya.

Just 7 percent of the Iraqi population had access to the internet in 2012. The internet operates without government restriction, and usage has steadily increased since 2003, but poor infrastructure and sporadic access to electricity have made Iraq’s penetration rate for terrestrial internet access one of the lowest

in the region. Instead, the majority of Iraqis who use the internet access it through wireless technology.

2013 SCORES

PRESS STATUS

Not Free

PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

67

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

23

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

28

ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

16

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