

Press Freedom in Iraq: Two Decades of Bloodshed and Impunity

This report was issued on World Press Freedom Day 2023 and covers the period stretching from May 2022 ,3, until May 2023 ,2. It accounts violations committed against press freedom and media workers and includes first-hand testimonies from journalists who covered the events which unfolded in Iraq during the last 12 months.

The Freedom of the Press in Iraq has fallen far short of what it should be in the country that has been upholding democracy as a slogan for twenty years and whose constitution guarantees the right to freedom of expression and obliges authorities to protect it.

Since 2003 and until today, hundreds of journalists and media personalities have been arrested, forcibly disappeared, killed, and prosecuted. Media outlets' headquarters have also been forcefully shut down, raided, and even set ablaze over their type of coverage or editorial lines.

Journalists working in Iraq are carrying out their duties in an unsafe environment and have become a common target for all conflicting parties in Iraq. After all, the press is a threat posed ahead of all armed and terrorist groups and influential parties in the state that are accused of corruption.

Even the Iraqi Journalists Syndicate, whose duty is to protect and defend media workers, has stood idle vis-à-vis the violations committed against journalists. This in itself is a dangerous indication of the status of the Syndicate, whose members ought to be further alert to the function of their institution.

Intimidation and Restriction

A considerable group of Iraqi journalists has, in the year stretching from May 2022 ,2, to May 2023 ,3, been faced with lawsuits filed by politicians and state institutions, as well as persons far from the realm of politics. Despite so, the Iraqi journalist regards judicial proceedings as far less threatening than abduction or arms and bullets; in fact, the former is seen as a chance to remain alive.

Ali Abdul-Karim is a journalist who works for the Al-Fallujah TV channel.

On Jan. 2022 ,26, Abdul-Karim produced a TV report titled "[Medical Errors: Doctor kills patients in gastric sleeve procedures.](#)" In his report, Abdul-Karim featured two testimonies from the mother and brother of one of the deceased patients. However, he did not mention the name of any doctor nor that of a clinic or hospital relevant to this case.

Despite this, a doctor who performs gastric sleeve operations in the Iraqi capital Baghdad lodged a lawsuit against Abdul-Karim. The journalist says that the doctor, whose name shall not be revealed for reasons relating to the lawsuit, is accusing him of defamation and slander even though Fallujah TV's report did not name or point fingers at any person or medical institution.

In the testimony he gave to the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights Abdul-Karim stated, "On Feb. 2023 ,19, I traveled to the capital of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), Erbil, to follow up with the lawsuit that was filed against me and the channel I am affiliated with. The lawsuit was filed against me due to a TV report that I had worked on over a year ago, which included a plea from a family whose son had died due to a medical error that occurred while he was undergoing a sleeve gastrectomy (gastric sleeve)."

Abdul-Karim added, "At nine o'clock in the morning of Feb. 2023 ,19, I went to the Bakhtiari Police Station in Erbil governorate. After being informed about the lawsuit against me, my testimony was taken, and I was transferred to a court of law. I was handcuffed and led by three security officers to a judge who asked me about the lawsuit. I asserted to the judge that I did not target the doctor in any way, nor did I name him or the place he works at."

Abdul-Karim added, "I was still handcuffed when I left the courtroom. People were staring at me as if I had committed a crime. I was then taken back to the police station and detained in a cell, like any criminal awaiting a judge's decision. Three and a half hours later, the judge released me on bail after completing the lawsuit requirements, which included fingerprinting at the forensic evidence department, and pending a final trial date."

The journalist, Abdul-Karim, did not mention the name of the doctor suing him. Despite so, the doctor's lawyer built his case on shares and comments made by citizens on the TV report. Accordingly, the journalist should not have borne any legal consequences over what others wrote on a public social media page allowing all users to comment. Accordingly, the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights stated, "The Iraqi law does not punish anyone over what others did or wrote. For this reason, the lawsuit against the journalist, Abdul-Karim, is seen as an attempt to incriminate and intimidate journalists, discouraging them from reporting on people's suffering, especially that caused by medical errors and exploitations."

Since article 38 of the Iraqi constitution guarantees the "Freedom of the press, printing, advertisement, media, and publication," the Iraqi Observatory asserts that this freedom "cannot be restricted by lawsuits which lack legal infractions."

The Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights contacted Abdul-Karim's attorney, who stated, "The case lodged against my client was filed per Article 9 of Law No. 35 of 2007, the [Press Law in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq](#)."

Article 9 of the Kurdistan Region's Press Law punishes journalists involved in "Sowing malice and fostering hatred, discord, and disagreement, as well as insulting religious beliefs and offending the religious symbols and sanctuaries of any religion or sect." Article 9 also punishes any offenses "related to the secrets of the private lives of individuals, even if true, if it offends them, in addition to slander and defamation."

Importantly, Abdul-Karim did not commit any of the aforementioned legal infractions. On the contrary, he merely produced a TV report in which he did not offend anyone.

Wissam Al-Mulla heads the Press Freedom department at the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights.

Speaking to the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights, Mulla stated, "What Fallujah TV correspondent Ali Abdul-Karim was subjected to is alarming and dangerous, especially as he was handcuffed, led to a prison cell, and detained without any clear conviction. We regard this as an attempt to muzzle journalists and restrict their work."

Mulla added, "The report prepared by Abdul-Karim did not include an accusation against the doctor, nor did it mention the practitioner's name or the medical institution he is affiliated with. However, Abdul-Karim's report was prominent since it touched on a dangerous topic concerning citizens' lives."

On his part, the head of the Press Freedom department at the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights highlighted that "The real danger lies in the noncompliance of Erbil courts with the directives of the head of the Supreme Judicial Council [Faiq Zidan], who had ordered that no journalist would be arrested, but rather that legal mechanisms would be adopted in cases when journalists would be summoned."

Therefore, we hope that the Supreme Judicial Council stands by journalists and supports their right of access to information and in their pursuits to uncover corruption cases and expose them to the public."

On Feb. 2023 ,27, Abdul-Karim informed the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights that the investigating judge dismissed the case against him due to insufficient evidence to convict him over producing a TV report about medical errors.

Of note, the head of the Supreme Judicial Council, Faiq Zidan, on Aug. 2020 ,11, asserted the importance of meticulously handling the complaints filed against journalists. In an official letter he sent to Iraqi courts, Chief Justice Zidan stated, "The methods of forced attendance under the Criminal Procedure Code No. 23 of 1971 firstly begin with Article 87 and the subsequent articles which stipulate that a letter to summon for attendance ought to be delivered to the person complained against."

The head of Fatah Alliance, Hadi Al-Ameri, on May 2022 ,19, filed a lawsuit against a presenter, Mustafa Al-Rubaye, who works at the state-owned Al-Iraqiya TV channel. Ameri accused Rubaye of “defamation” based on Article 434 of the Iraqi Penal Code (Law No. 1969).

In a statement he posted on his official Facebook page, Rubaye wrote, “I will appear before the Iraqi court of law over a complaint filed personally by Mr. Hadi Al-Ameri per Article 434 of the Iraqi Penal Code. I am for legal practices, and I have complete confidence in the Iraqi judiciary and total belief that resorting to the judiciary is a free exercise.”

In another instance, the state-owned Iraqiya TV channel, on Jun. 2022 ,1, suspended a program titled “Al-Muhayed” [The Impartial] presented by media personality Saadoun Mohsen Damad. The decision was made against the backdrop of the program’s hosting political writer Sarmad Al-Taei who criticized the Supreme Judicial Council.

Later, on Jun. 2022 ,16, Iraq’s Parliament Speaker, Mohammed Al-Halbousi, filed a lawsuit against the Iraqi outlet, Al-Taghier TV, and one of its presenters, Najm Al-Rubaye.

The complaint was lodged over hosting Iraqi politician Mashan Al-Jubouri who blasted and criticized the Speaker, Halbousi, during his interview with the channel. In his complaint, the Iraqi Parliament Speaker’s representative filed charges against the TV presenter, Rubaye, accusing him and his guest, Jubouri, of “incitement and undermining of community peace and security.”

A similar complaint was made on Mar. 2023 ,20, against another Iraqi outlet, I-News TV channel, and one of its correspondents, Israa Khaled. A “defamation” lawsuit was lodged by the Iraqi Ministry of Interior’s Crime Control Directorate after the channel aired a report about problems and corruption plaguing the directorate.

On Feb. 2023 ,19, a lawsuit was filed against media personality Adnan Al-Ta’i, who works at the local Iraqi channel UTV, over his alleged “incitement of sectarian strife.”

Ta’i had, during an episode of his program, aired on Feb. 2023 ,13, called out the religious eulogist Basim Al-Karbalaei asking whether or not “some of his religious poems incite sectarian strife?” Ta’i added, “Why doesn’t the law hold him [Karbalaei] accountable?”

Speaking to the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights, Ta’i stated, “I have received countless threats, threats that no one can begin to imagine. I believe that if they had caught me, they would have hacked me to pieces.” Commenting on the lawsuit against him, Ta’i added, “I am waiting for the judiciary’s decision; I have complete trust in the judiciary, which I believe should base its decision on the evidence and legal facts at hand.”

Notably, in the context of the complaint against Ta’i, one of the lawyers who lodged it claimed that the UTV presenter’s “question [about Karbalaei] had triggered the terrorist

attack which targeted Tarmiyah district, north of Baghdad, on Feb. 2023 ,16.”

In late August of 2022, Baghdad’s heavily fortified Green Zone was a scene to protest and armed confrontations. Clashes had erupted between members of the Saraya Al-Salam [The Peace Brigades]—affiliated with the head of the Sadrist Movement, Muqtada Al-Sadr— and members of the state-sponsored Popular Mobilization Units forces and armed factions that are affiliated with other Iraqi political parties.

Al-Jazeera Network staff members covering the Green Zone events on Aug. 2022 ,29, were arrested. Staff members affiliated with Al-Rasheed TV were also arrested around that same period.

Perpetrators Left Unpunished

Iraq has been suffering from the impunity of the perpetrators who commit crimes against journalists for nearly two decades. Since 2003, more than 475 journalists and media workers have been killed while all the perpetrators went unpunished. One exception that saw perpetrators be held accountable for their crimes was the case of Iraq journalist Ahmed Abdul Samad, who was slain on Jan. 2020 ,20, in the southernmost Iraqi governorate of Basra. While this implies that the impunity index in Iraq is considerably high, it also places the country alongside those most dangerous for journalistic work.

The Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights has noted that the index for dangers and risks of journalistic work in Iraq has witnessed a surge marked by renewed threats and targeting of journalists and media workers.

It is also no longer surprising to find Iraqi authorities standing idle vis-à-vis all of what journalists and media outlets are exposed to violations. Unfortunately, the weakened response by the authorities has long served as a factor contributing to the impunity of the perpetrators and the rise in violence against journalists.

On Jul. 2022 ,24, an Iraqi security force raided the Al-Baghdadia TV headquarters on Abu Nuwas Street in central Baghdad. The move followed the Iraqi Communications and Media Commission’s winning a lawsuit it had filed against the channel. Baghdadia TV’s staff were exposed to violence at the hands of security forces during the raid.

Meanwhile, the pan-Arab Al-Mayadeen TV’s correspondent, Abdullah Badran, on Aug. 2022 ,30, sustained injuries during his coverage of protests that were taking place at the doorstep of Baghdad’s Green Zone. A sound grenade went off next to Badran, thus wounding him and prompting his hospitalization.

On his part, Dijlah TV correspondent Mustafa Latif, who was also covering the armed clashes near the Green Zone, was wounded on Aug. 2022 ,30. Local Iraqi outlet, Shafaq News agency’s correspondent and cameraman also sustained injuries while covering the infighting.

UTV is a private Iraqi channel owned by businessman and politician Khamis Al-Khanjar.

On Feb. 2023 ,18, UTV's Baghdad bureau, situated on the Iraqi capital's Al-Nidal Street, came under a hand-grenade attack. UTV's main headquarters is based in the Turkish megacity of Istanbul. UTV had voiced its condemnation of the attack that targeted its office and asserted that its "media discourse is moderate." The outlet also urged security forces to provide the needed protection for its Baghdad bureau and to investigate the attack it came under.

Notably, this was not the first time UTV had come under such an attack. On Jul. 2020 ,4, the channel was threatened with arson after being accused of "targeting the Shiite religious leadership." On Oct. 2021 ,28, the outlet also received a threat that came in the form of a "lighter and threat of torching" delivered to its office by a group of armed individuals.

Prior to that, on Feb. 2021 ,17, UTV had received more threats after loyalists of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) accused the outlet of "insulting" Popular Mobilization Units commander Abdul Aziz Al-Muhammadawi, widely known by the nom de guerre "Abu Fadak."

The safety of journalists and media outlets working in Iraq cannot be guaranteed no matter how vast the space provided for freedom of speech is and regardless of how balanced the stances of authorities and armed and political forces are vis-à-vis press freedom. This balance is indeed fragile and could collapse at any moment.

Moreover, despite receiving a vote of confidence from the Iraqi parliament on Oct. ,27 2022, the government of Prime Minister Muhammad Shia' Al-Sudani is yet to exert efforts to protect journalists and media outlets. Instead, it has adopted an approach similar to the governments that preceded it, which maintained silence over the violations committed against journalists and press freedom, if not having had a hand in them.

On Nov. 2023 ,2, the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights urged the Sudani government to probe the killings of Iraqi journalists slain by perpetrators who escaped punishment in recent years. The Observatory cautioned Mr. Sudani against his government's adopting the same approach as previous governments. However, no signs of real action have thus far been seen or felt.

Amin Nasser is the Beirut bureau chief of the state-owned Al-Iraqiya TV channel.

On Feb. 2023 ,17, Nasser informed the Iraqi Human Rights Observatory that he had received death threats. Nasser stated, "In the early hours of Feb. 17, I received a call from an Iraqi phone number, during which I was told, wherever you may be, whether in Beirut or Baghdad, we will chop you into pieces."

Nasser elaborated that he asked the person speaking, "Why are you threatening me? Is

there a relationship of some sort between us? Who are you?" At that point, the Iraqi journalist says, "The conversation became intense, our voices got higher, and we started yelling at each other."

Following the incident, Nasser says he "sent Iraqi security forces the number" which called him. The authorities urged him to file an official complaint. "This is the second such threat I have received in the past three months; I have informed several security officials about them," Nasser added.

Nasser travels back and forth between Beirut and Baghdad. He is a participant in several WhatsApp groups where he engages in heated debates with officials and politicians. He regularly publishes posts about the corruption of Iraqi officials, especially those who live between Beirut and Baghdad, on his social media pages. Nasser also publishes information about sensitive security dossiers involving senior terrorist commanders or influential figures escaping justice.

Jaafar Abdul Karim is a TV presenter who hosts a talk show, JaafarTalk, for Germany's state-owned Deutsche Welle (DW).

Abdul Karim told the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights that he was in Baghdad on Feb. 2023 ,2, to film an episode about corruption, protests, and women's rights in Iraq for his program. However, he was forced to cancel filming and return to Germany despite having completed all the needed preparations, including inviting guests and setting up a location for filming.

Before arriving in Iraq, a widescale defamation campaign was launched against Abdul Karim on social media over addressing topics on his show that are considered taboo in Iraqi society. He was also attacked over his alleged "promotion of homosexuality" and was threatened via numerous social media accounts.

DW's website cited Abdul Karim as saying, "The state-affiliated National Communications and Media Commission of Iraq unexpectedly asked us for special authorization to film the episode, mindful that such authorizations are usually applied for and received by DW's partners in Iraq."

In the statement it published on its website to condemn the incident, DW detailed how an Iraqi "interior ministry representative on Feb. 2023 ,1, visited the hotel where JaafarTalk's crew members were staying.

According to the information obtained by DW, the host Jaafar Abdul Karim was informed that he was no longer allowed to film the episode for his program without acquiring special authorization. He was also informed that he would be arrested if he were to film and that the government could not ensure his safety."

Abdul Karim described what happened as “an arbitrary measure against him and his crew.” He added, “A day before filming, new demands were being asked of us, and new hurdles were put ahead of us every hour.”

The Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights asserts that Iraqi authorities must provide the needed protection for Iraqi and foreign journalists working in Iraq. They must also prevent the transformation of Iraq into an unsafe environment for journalistic work. State institutions should work towards preserving the freedom of the press, representing the backbone of any democracy.

The measures adopted by the Iraqi authorities allow perpetrators to escape punishment. It is important to stress that the absence of press freedoms will transform the country into a giant prison. This is regardless of how often political powers and influential figures may assert the prevalence of democracy in Iraq or the vast space given freedom of expression. In reality, indexes speak much louder than words.

Tahsin Taha is an Iraqi journalist working for the Al-Araby media outlet.

Speaking to the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights, Taha stated, “The political cover and umbrella that shield those involved in crimes against journalists are obstructing the course of justice from being followed and preventing the arrest of such perpetrators.”

The Iraqi journalist elaborated, “Impunity has contributed to the increase in the rate of crimes committed against journalists. Meanwhile, the Iraqi authorities are also subjected to political pressures that contribute to allowing criminals to go unpunished. It is important to highlight that democracy in Iraq cannot be upheld without empowering the fourth estate and allowing it to relay facts to the public. It is, therefore, to provide a legal cover to journalists, to safeguard them from crimes that target them.”

The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNESCO, stated that more than 950 journalists have been killed across the globe since 2012 and that culprits in 9 out of 10 crimes manage to escape punishment. The Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights notes that Iraq is among the countries which have the highest impunity rates when it comes to crimes committed against journalists.

Nour Ibrahim is an Iraqi journalist who works for the “Al-Bayyinah Al-Janoubia” channel.

Speaking to the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights, Ibrahim said, “Many journalists have lost their lives merely for covering stories on corruption or human rights violations. They were silenced by influential actors either by threats or killing. The government ought to rise to its responsibility of supporting journalists and safeguarding them from treacherous gunfire, to thus allow these media workers to carry out their duties better.”

She also noted that “Crimes committed against journalists are often registered as attacks whose offenders are unknown. Therefore, we demand the uncovering of these crimes and the perpetrators standing behind them so that they serve as an example for those who try to obstruct journalistic work and assassinate journalists.”

Thu Al-Fiqar Al-Khafaji is a journalist based in the southern Iraqi governorate of Babylon and working for Al-Ahad TV.

Khafaji stated, “On Jul. 2022 ,5, I was subject to an assassination attempt by armed individuals upon arriving at my home. I was shot at from as close as 50 meters away but luckily survived. Prior to this attempt, I had received several threats and lodged a lawsuit as a result. Unfortunately, until now, no proceedings have been taken; I was instead asked to provide the names of the perpetrators who tried to assassinate me, which is extremely difficult. How would I know?”

According to Khafaji, “The perpetrators carrying out such operations belong to organized shadow groups which carry out systematic killings and targeting. These groups provide the perpetrators with the needed protection from legal action.”

He also elaborated, “Five days prior to the assassination attempt, security authorities informed me that I was threatened, and my life was at risk. This is the third assassination attempt I have been subjected to, following a previous one which took place in 2015 and another second one in 2019.”

Fallujah TV journalist, Abdul-Karim, told the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights, “We need a serious security effort and stand from the institutions concerned with journalist rights. Many who have infringed on press freedom have not been held accountable for their wrongdoings, highlighting the government’s insufficient attention to such cases. It is the duty of the [Sudani-led] incumbent government to provide further care for journalists and to safeguard their lives.”

The Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights asserts that journalists in Iraq face many dangers, most of which amount to crimes often registered as committed by “unknown” offenders. The previous Iraqi governments have facilitated the impunity of culprits, thus rewarding them for their crimes against media workers.

Ibrahim Al-Mahmoud is an Iraqi journalist working at the I-News TV channel.

He states, “When journalists are sent on assignments, they are exposed to threats from some tribes or actors whose interests might be harmed if corruption cases are uncovered. Such incidents have been recorded throughout Iraq, but what have the Iraqi judiciary and security forces done to the perpetrators?”

Mahmoud added that “the investigative committees which were formed [to look into crimes committed against journalists] have not presented viable outcomes. A law that safeguards journalists from killing and threats ought to be passed. While the Iraqi governments are traditionally keen on having journalists highlight their achievements, when these same journalists are faced with dangers, the governments fail to assist or protect them.”

On the contrary, the previous Iraqi governments’ actions have instead contributed to creating a safe environment for perpetrators who commit crimes against Iraqi journalists. Indeed, the leniency, negligence, and tolerance adopted by some perpetrators, whether for personal or political reasons, have allowed these culprits to commit crimes and go unpunished for their wrongdoings.

Youssef Salman is an Iraqi journalist who works for the private-owned National Iraqi News Agency (NINA).

Speaking to the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights, Salman stated, “The role Iraqi journalists play in finding facts relevant to corruption cases is indispensable and at the same time dangerous. Journalists who have been involved in blowing the whistle on major corruption cases have been subjected to organized targeting. Murders of journalists are making headlines in Iraq on an almost daily basis. Therefore, Iraqi governments should be more serious about not allowing perpetrators to escape punishment.”

Mohammad Firas is a journalist who works at the Al-Taghier TV channel.

Firas says, “Journalists act as the fourth estate in all countries regardless of whether or not these countries acknowledge it as an authority. The surge in crimes committed against journalists and the leniency in dealing with those standing behind them ultimately serves groups and parties which do not wish for the journalists’ role to become stronger.

Such parties do not want journalists to be emboldened, so we find that reactions to crimes committed against journalists are traditionally minimal, unfortunately emboldening the perpetrators instead. Political actors ought to stand by the journalist. In the end, any government official or politician who is not involved in corruption cases and whose hands are not stained with blood should not be fearful of the press.”

The Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights believes that the incumbent government led by Prime Minister Muhammad Shia’ Al-Sudani has the opportunity to fulfill its obligations to protect human rights. It is also this government’s duty to uphold every pledge it has made and to end the impunity of perpetrators committing crimes against Iraqi journalists. After all, this government is responsible for protecting these journalists, and the window of opportunity to hold perpetrators accountable is open wide.

Blocking Media Coverage

The Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights stated that the Iraqi House of Representatives' media office had prohibited several media outlets and journalists from entering the legislature's building to cover a parliamentary session to elect a president for the Republic of Iraq.

A group of Iraqi journalists who regularly cover the Iraqi parliament's sessions were informed that the legislature had banned them from entering its building to cover the parliamentary session for the election of the Iraqi president. The move was adopted under the pretext that "coverage was restricted to a limited number of media outlets."

The parliament's media office had barred several media outlets which arrived at the parliament building from covering the presidential election session. Among the banned outlets was the pan-Arab Al-Mayadeen TV, said its bureau chief Abdullah Badran.

In a phone call he held with the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights, Badran then stated, "The Iraqi legislature's media office informed us that we are not allowed to enter [parliament building] to cover [the developments]." He added, "We are not standing at the parliament building's entrance with a number of media outlets and satellite channels who had also been informed by the legislature that entrance [that day] was restricted to a number of outlets."

Mohammad Imad is a journalist who works for the Baghdad Al-Yawm media outlet and was also prevented from entering the parliament building that day. He stated, "I sent a message requesting permission to enter to cover the key session. I received a message from the parliament's media office: 'We regret to inform you that you will not be granted permission to enter [parliament building for coverage] today.'"

Imad contacted the media office to inform them that he needed to enter to cover the developments of the key session that day. He says that he was then informed that attendance of media outlets that day would not be open for all but would rather be restricted to a specific number of local media outlets only.

Sabah Al-Lami heads the Middle East Services Department at the Associated Press (AP).

Lami stated, "AP's crew was not the only one prevented from entering the parliament building; a considerable number of journalists were also banned. They gathered near the entrance located at the Al-Tashri junction facing the Al-Rashid hotel. I believe what happened was not a ban but rather poor coordination. The entrance [of media staff that day] was restricted to the vehicle parking space gate, which faces the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers. Entrance from that gate is only allowed for those with a Green Zone access card." Lami elaborated, "Entry ought to have been allowed through two

entrances because many journalists and media workers do not have a Green Zone access card.”

The Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights affirms that instead of restricting media coverage to a limited number of outlets, the Iraqi parliament’s media office ought to implement a more collaborative mechanism to coordinate better and facilitate the work of media outlets and their coverage of parliamentary sessions.

Moreover, the Observatory urged the Iraqi government to provide immediate protection to Al-Rabiaa TV and its staff members after several Sadrist Movement loyalists stormed the outlet. Rabiaa TV staff members had appealed to the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights to urge the Iraqi government to fulfill its obligations of preventing any act of violence and provide the necessary protection for media outlets, which are considered the building block for any democracy.

Video footage showed angry protesters storming into Rabiaa TV’s headquarters in Baghdad’s central Al-Karrada district. They also destroyed the outlet’s equipment while the forces assigned to protect it were seen as unable to protect the outlet and prevent the protesters from breaking in.

The difference of opinions should not be faced with violence and threats but by opposing that opinion in a civilized manner and per the stipulations of the Iraqi Constitution’s Article 38.

Moreover, political forces should not employ loyalists to silence those whose opinions differ. Instead, they ought to counter the opposing opinions by voicing their viewpoints through the diverse Iraqi media outlets, which are no longer restricted to one party without the other.

The Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights on Sept. 2022 ,1, stated that all conflicting parties involved in the Aug. 29 armed clashes, which took place near Baghdad’s Green Zone, considered journalists and media outlets as an enemy and directly targeted them as a result. In some instances, the targeting nearly led to fatalities.

The Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights documented the testimonies of eight field reporters covering the protests and armed confrontations that stretched for two days, Aug. 29 and 2022 ,30. Journalists and media workers who provided the testimonies confirmed that protesters and armed individuals directly targeted them. These journalists also said they were targeted by members of security forces and other armed individuals dressed in black and had no identification badges.

Notably, the Iraqi Journalists Syndicate, whose duty is to protect those working in the media and journalism field and defend their rights, stood idle vis-à-vis the violations committed against journalists. The deafening silence on the Syndicate's behalf is a dangerous indication that should prompt its members to be further watchful of their institution.

“They took my camera and the money in my pockets.”

The events and testimonies mentioned above confirm what the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights stated in the [report](#) published on May 2022 ,3, which marked Press Freedom Day. The Observatory highlighted the heightened enmity against press freedom in Iraq, and the enemies of the press are growing. At the same time, the country is plagued with impunity for offenders who commit any violation.

The Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights has shared on its official Facebook page a [video](#) that documents the assault of AP cameraman Hadi Mizban at the hands of the special operations forces. In the [video](#), Mizban is heard as stating, “They took everything I had and beat me; they took my camera and the money in my pockets. I was assaulted by a lieutenant colonel.”

The Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights notes, “Security personnel are still disrespectfully treating journalists; they insist on insulting and assaulting media workers. Unfortunately, some security members in Iraq perceive the press with a negative eye, leading to numerous and repeated violations against journalists.”

“Mortar shrapnel settled in my face.”

Mustafa Latif is a reporter who works for Dijlah TV.

Speaking to the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights, Latif stated, “At noon on a Tuesday, we embarked on our coverage of the recent developments that were taking place in Baghdad. We were standing at the Al-Tashri junction [near one of the Iraqi parliament's entrances] near the Salhiya Police Station. We were following the confrontations between the protesters and the security forces [based] inside the Green Zone.”

That day Latif says, “We came under a mortar attack, and I sustained injuries in my face and neck. The injuries are still visible today, and I had mortar shrapnel settled in my face. As a result, I was transferred to the Al-Karama [Teaching] Hospital and later to Al-Kadhimiya Hospital, where they carried out a medical checkup and informed me that [the shrapnel] was settled. I underwent periodic checkups until the shrapnel was removed.”

Article 9 of the Journalist Protection Law of 2011 stipulates that “Anyone who assaults a journalist during their, or as a result of their carrying out his duties would receive the [same] punishment prescribed for those who assault an employee during their or as a result of their performing their professional duties.”

“Live bullets were hitting those next to us.”

Badr Al-Rakabi is a correspondent who works with Al-Taghier TV.

Rakabi states, “My colleague, a cameraman, Abdullah Abd Al-Karim, and I were beaten with batons, and our equipment was smashed; we were cursed at, insulted, and threatened with arms by an unknown group. They were dressed in black, and their faces were masked. We came under attack only because we are journalists reporting on events and covering the ongoing developments.”

The journalist elaborated, “After we exited the government palace, we made our way to parliament with great difficulty. A hail of bullets and tear gas canisters were fired directly at the protesters, not at the skies above them, while we stood to their side. We were expecting to be hit at any moment because the live bullets were hitting those next to us, and the gas bombs were going off nearby as we watched some of the demonstrators fall to the ground while they were trying to run away.”

Rakabi added, “We tried to seek help from the army as we ran out of energy and could not run any further. However, they refrained from helping us due to the [assaulting] forces’ insistence to disperse the protesters and push them back near parliament by force. After reaching the parliament building, our health deteriorated due to our inhaling tear gas that was being fired at us. We were then transferred to the nearest hospital, which placed oxygen masks on our faces and provided first aid.”

Wissam Flayeh is a cameraman who works for Kurdsat TV.

Speaking to the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights, Flayeh stated, “My colleague, Bistoun Abd Al-Salam, and I was attacked by angry protesters in the middle of our live broadcast. They called us names and said we were affiliated with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. While we were trying to exit the scene, another group also assaulted us, and it did not end until a state security force interfered. This incident took place while the armed confrontations were still at the beginning at around 5 or 6 pm local time in Baghdad.”

Flayeh added, “At around 8 pm the same day, we were assaulted again in the Al-Alawi region in Baghdad. Angry protesters beat us and spewed insults at us as well.”

“A force dressed in black... severely beat me.”

Muntathar Jaafar is a cameraman who works for the media outlet, Rudaw.

Speaking to the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights, Jaafar stated, “My colleague, a Rudaw correspondent, Halkawt Aziz, was doing a live report about the developments. Protesters had stormed the government palace, and security forces launched an attack against them. The demonstrators withdrew from one exit, and we withdrew with them. When we left the government palace, a force dressed in black confiscated all of my equipment and severely

beat me. I had to leave everything and escape the scene.”

Jaafar added, “Another crew working for the channel [Rudaw], including my colleagues Haidar Doski and Hajar Khorshid, also came under attack. Their equipment, including a Mac Book laptop, was also confiscated. Doski and Khorshid were severely beaten without any fault.”

“A sound bomb hit our correspondent’s leg and broke it.”

Speaking to the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights, Fallujah TV’s correspondent, Abdul-Karim, stated, “Two of our colleagues at [Fallujah TV] channel, Saif Ali and Hassan Al-Khafaji, sustained injuries while covering the protests. When the confrontations erupted, they ran to escape the scene, when a sound bomb hit our correspondent [Ali’s] leg and broke it. His leg was split open, and he still, until today, suffers from a problem in the middle ear.”

Abdul-Karim also said his other colleague, “Hassan [Al-Khafaji] was cornered by a security force inside the Government Palace. The force members were dressed in black and of unknown affiliation. They broke his camera and other equipment. While the members of this force spewed insults at both Khafaji and Ali, five of them severely beat Khafaji.”

On their part, Al-Jazeera network’s crew and correspondent Samer Youssef were also assaulted by armed men while reporting live from inside the government palace. Armed men dressed in black and affiliated with a special force attacked Jazeera’s team and beat them truncheons.

Another journalist who witnessed the incident confirmed to the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights that the Qatari outlet’s crew was also at risk of being hit with live gunfire. The eyewitness journalist added, “The vehicle transporting Jazeera’s team was bulletproof and thus safeguarded them. Afterward, a security force stopped the vehicle and tried to drag the driver out of it. The team could only escape the scene after being forced to hand in their cameras and filming equipment. Even while trying to escape, another force assaulted them and their vehicle.”

A correspondent’s arm was broken, while a cameraman suffered a rupture in his

Haidar Al-Sheikh is a correspondent for the Shafaq News agency.

Speaking to the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights, Sheikh stated, “On Monday at 4:22 pm local time in Baghdad, we were covering the developments which saw Sadrist Movement loyalists storm the Palace of the Republic [Presidential Palace] and try to cross the Al-Muallaq Bridge [Jul. 14 Bridge] to reach the district of Jadriyah where [rival] loyalists of the Shiite Coordination Framework were [gathered].

Then gunshots were fired at the Al-Muallaq bridge, and I was hit with a rubber bullet, fell to the ground, and was transported to a hospital." Sheikh added, "X-ray images showed my arm was broken and had to be splinted. Those were callous times."

Kamal Raad is a cameraman for Dijlah TV.

Speaking to the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights, Raad stated, "We were broadcasting live from a point near the Salhiya Police Station, which is close to the parliament building. Suddenly a mortar shell fell meters away; we miraculously survived, but I suffered a rupture in my arm, and my colleague, Mustafa, sustained injuries in his face."

Wissam Al-Mulla heads the Press Freedom department at the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights.

Mulla noted, "Unfortunately, Iraqi authorities still use violence against journalists and consider them enemies, thus creating an unsafe environment for journalistic work." He added, "The distressing incidents recorded during the press coverage of the Green Zone events have sparked a state of concern for journalists who now feel that they could come under similar attacks at any moment. What further deepens the journalists' alarm is that the security forces who should have been providing media workers with the much-needed protection were on the attacking side."

The Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights regrets to assert that all conflicting sides proved to have targeted journalists directly. The rivals had found common ground in considering the press an enemy. While these actions and approaches are not new, they further indicate that the freedom of the press in Iraq is indeed declining and that field reporters are facing grave threats.

Unfortunately, the previous government led by former prime minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi (2014-2020) needed to work towards safeguarding journalists. It also failed to hold accountable those who had committed violations against media workers, even perpetrators who belonged to military institutions and had evidence indicting them. It seems that journalists and their safety have not been seen as a priority by any of the successive Iraqi governments, even though the freedom of the press is considered a building block for any democracy.

Therefore, the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights urges media institutions to equip their workers with the professional safety equipment needed during the coverage of conflicts and protests. Moreover, the Observatory calls on all parties involved in armed confrontations and conflicts not to perceive journalists as enemies, as that would create an unsafe environment for the press and undermine the public's access to facts and information.

In conclusion, the Observatory notes that press freedom and media workers have unfortunately become a common adversary that all parties in Iraq are trying to target without any deterrent or government procedures that would safeguard journalists. Unfortunately, the authorities have become a key actor undermining press freedom and the role of the fourth estate.