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2015 Scores

Press Status: Not Free

Press Freedom Score (0 = best, 100 = worst): 72

Legal Environment (0 = best, 30 = worst): 23

Political Environment (0 = best, 40 = worst): 33

Economic Environment (0 = best, 30 = worst): 16

Press freedom conditions deteriorated in 2014, with rising violence and repression making Iraq one of the world's most deadly countries for journalists. As the Islamic State (IS) militant group seized control in northwestern Iraq, including the city of Mosul, the central government in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Erbil instituted media blackouts in the areas under attack. Throughout the year, particularly in territory under de facto IS rule, reporters were executed, detained, beaten, and had their equipment confiscated with impunity.

Legal Environment

Iraq's constitution protects freedom of speech and expression, but vague and redundant laws govern the media. The 1968 Publications Law prescribes up to seven years in prison for insulting the government, and the 1969 penal code criminalizes 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.

Among other cases during the year, in March the Housing Ministry won a criminal libel case against journalist Zahir al-Fatlawi over an article on the *Kitabat* website in which he accused the ministry of corruption. Al-Fatlawi was fined 1 million dinars (\$860) or six months in prison, and the judge reportedly disregarded evidence supporting the article's allegations. However, in December, recently elected prime minister Haider al-Abadi issued an order that withdrew all government legal cases against journalists and media outlets.

In areas under KRG control, the Kurdistan Press Law protects journalists' right to obtain information "of importance to citizens" and "relevant to the public interest." The law also requires officials to investigate incidents in which journalists are injured or killed as a result of their work. However, few journalists' deaths have been investigated. Public officials have often used the region's penal code to sue journalists for libel, usually for stories about corruption.

Iraq lacks national legislation guaranteeing access to government information, and journalists struggle to

obtain official documents in practice.

The government-controlled Communications and Media Commission (CMC) is the primary body responsible for regulating broadcast media. After the government declared a state of emergency amid the IS offensive in early June 2014, the CMC issued "mandatory" guidelines for media "during the war on terror" – a series of vague stipulations that placed arbitrary restrictions on coverage. One provision required the media to "hold on to the patriotic sense" and to "be careful when broadcasting material that ... may express insulting sentiments" or does "not accord with the moral and patriotic order required for the war on terror." Another forbade media outlets from broadcasting or publishing material that "may be interpreted as being against the security forces," and instead obliged journalists to "focus on the security achievements of the armed forces." These guidelines led to inaccurate reports on the course of the fighting, including false claims that the military had defeated IS forces in Tikrit, which in fact remained under the group's control. Media in Iraqi Kurdistan received similar guidelines.

Repeatedly during 2014, the CMC and other government entities threatened to close or revoke the licenses of critical media outlets, particularly those with foreign ties that gave a platform to Sunni politicians, carried denunciations of the government of then prime minister Nouri al-Maliki, or provided live coverage of the fight against IS. In January, the Iraqi government banned the printing and distribution of the Saudi-owned pan-Arab daily *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*. In June, the government threatened to close the Iraq bureaus of the Saudi-funded television networks Al-Arabiya and Al-Hadath, both based in the United Arab Emirates.

Political Environment

The Iraqi news media are diverse and collectively present a range of views, but most outlets are owned by or affiliated with political parties and ethnic factions, often leading to sharply partisan coverage.

Outlets also face various forms of pressure from the authorities, and reporters are regularly denied access to sensitive events and officials. Fear of reprisals – from fatal violence to criminal libel suits – makes self-censorship among journalists common.

The conflict with IS in 2014 prompted restrictions on journalists' access to the affected areas as well as large-scale shutdowns of media and internet services. In January 2014, when IS advanced into the city of Fallujah in Anbar Province, the Iraqi government imposed a media blackout, denying access to independent journalists to cover the fighting. Shortly after IS gained control of Mosul in June, the prime minister's office ordered the Ministry of Communications to shut down internet service in IS-occupied provinces, ostensibly to prevent the group from using social media to plan attacks and release propaganda. Access to websites such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter was reportedly blocked across the country. Meanwhile, IS itself closed and confiscated media facilities in areas it controlled.

Journalists face regular threats and physical harassment from both state and nonstate actors, and Iraq had one of the world's highest murder rates for journalists in 2014. Mosul was especially dangerous for media workers, even before the IS takeover. Throughout the IS-occupied region, journalists were attacked or murdered for supposedly serving as spies or otherwise undermining the group's mission. In October, Mohanad al-Aqidi, a correspondent for the Sada news agency in Mosul, was reportedly shot dead in IS custody. That month in Samarra, IS beheaded Raad Mohamed al-Azzawi, a cameraman for Sama Salah Aldeen TV. In November, IS executed five journalists in Mosul who had worked with the local station Shema TV. By the end of 2014, the risk of kidnapping and execution was a constant threat for any journalists remaining in IS territory, and the group was reportedly holding about 20 journalists in Mosul.

A number of journalists were also killed or injured during the year by security personnel, bombings and gunfire associated with the broader conflict, or in reprisal attacks by factions other than IS. In January, a Fallujah TV correspondent was killed in a roadside bombing in Khalidiya. In February, *Al-Sabah al-Jadid's* Baghdad offices were bombed after the newspaper published a cartoon deemed offensive to Iran's supreme leader. In March, two journalists working with the state-owned Al-Iraqiya television channel

were killed in a suicide bombing south of Baghdad, a journalist for Radio Free Iraq was killed by a government security officer in the capital, and a Radio Babel journalist was injured when gunmen attacked him outside his home in Babil Province. In April, unidentified assailants attacked the Baghdad offices of the Iraqi dailies *Al-Nas* and *Al-Mustaqbal*, assaulting their journalists for allegedly criticizing an Iraqi Shiite cleric. During Iraq's parliamentary elections that month, police routinely denied journalists access to polling stations and protests. Al-Baghdadiya TV faced harassment including arrest warrants against its journalists in March and a May assault on the office of photographer and correspondent Hussam al-Aqooly, who was stabbed and had his equipment confiscated. In June, an Al-Ahad TV cameraman was killed amid fighting with IS in Diyala Province. In July, assailants wearing Iraqi military uniforms threatened journalists in the Baghdad office of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) daily *Al-Taakhi*, and confiscated equipment and cash. A Kurdish journalist from Turkey, Leyla Yildizhan, also known as Deniz Firat, was killed in August while embedded with Kurdish forces fighting IS in northern Iraq.

Journalists in Iraqi Kurdistan, particularly those working for independent or opposition outlets, sometimes face a hostile environment away from the conflict zone. Kawa Garmyane, editor in chief of the news website *Rayel* and a correspondent for the newspaper *Awene*, was shot to death in December 2013, apparently in connection with his reporting on alleged corruption in the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) party. The prime suspect, PUK official Mahmud Sangawi, was arrested in January 2014 but released shortly thereafter, and continued to defend his innocence. Separately, in July, Payam TV presenter Ayhan Saeed was badly beaten by unidentified assailants in the city of Dohuk. The lack of successful prosecutions in most cases has created a climate of impunity.

Economic Environment

Hundreds of privately owned television, radio, and print media outlets have opened since Saddam Hussein's regime was overthrown in 2003, with publications in languages including Arabic, Kurdish, Syriac, and Turkmen. However, political parties and ethnic factions fund most media outlets. The government controls the Iraqi Media Network, a holding company that owns Al-Iraqiya television, Republic of Iraq Radio, and the newspaper *Al-Sabah*. Satellite dishes are legal, and most homes in Iraq have a dish. More than 30 satellite networks transmit into Iraq, including Al-Sharqiya, an Iraqi-owned station that broadcasts from Dubai; Qatar's Al-Jazeera; and the Saudi-owned Al-Arabiya. IS seized media outlets in Mosul and Tikrit in 2014, and it has attempted to establish its own communications infrastructure in Iraqi territory under its control, including both broadcast and print media outlets.

Commercial advertising revenues alone are too small to sustain Iraq's private media, and the government shapes the editorial content of some outlets by manipulating public advertising or pressuring private advertisers. Journalists have also reportedly slanted the news in return for bribes from officials, who offer money, land, and other rewards. In KRG areas, independent media suffer from lack of advertising and are unable to compete with outlets that are subsidized by the major Kurdish parties.

Until the crisis created by the IS offensive in the summer of 2014, the internet had largely operated without government restriction, and usage had steadily increased since 2003. A growing number of Iraqis turn to digital and social media to spread information and consume news. However, poor infrastructure and sporadic access to electricity continue to make Iraq's penetration rate for terrestrial internet access one of the lowest in the region. Instead, the majority of Iraqi users get online with wireless technology. The overall internet penetration rate stood at about 11 percent in 2014.

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