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Freedom of the Press 2012 - Iraq

2012 Scores

Press Status: Not Free**Press Freedom Score:** 69**Legal Environment:** 23**Political Environment:** 30**Economic Environment:** 16

The revolutions and uprisings that swept much of the Middle East in 2011 barely touched Iraq, but with several journalists killed and continuing violence against media workers, the country remained one of the world's most dangerous places for reporters. 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 protections for free speech and provided for journalists' "needed protection." 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 step in the right direction, media watchdog organizations criticized it for failing to include concrete sanctions against authorities who violate its provisions.

The Communications and Media Commission requires media outlets to obtain licenses to operate and bars coverage deemed to be "an incitement to violence." A bill proposed in the Kurdistan region in May 2011 would create a Higher Council for Information consisting of government appointees. Media groups derided the plan for precluding any semblance of independence on the council. However, the bill had not been passed by year's end.

The Iraqi media environment is heavily politicized. Since political factions and ethnic groups control many of the country's news outlets, coverage of politics and 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.

While Iraqis did not experience the full extent of the Arab Spring, they did protest against corruption and a lack of public services during 2011, and journalists covering those demonstrations were often jailed and beaten by security forces. Media organizations reported 160 such incidents during a two-week period in March. Similar cases of beatings, detentions, and closures of media offices continued throughout the year. In November, American freelance journalist Daniel Smith was detained by Iraqi security forces and charged with "inciting popular protests." He was subsequently released. Separately, Saad al-Awsi, editor of the weekly Baghdad newspaper *Al-Shahid*, was released in August after 16 months in detention. Security forces had arrested him after he published an article criticizing Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

Five journalists were killed in connection with their work in 2011, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, but others were killed in ambiguous circumstances or caught in general bombings or attacks. In February 2011, a correspondent for the satellite television channel Al-Itijah was killed when a suicide bomber struck a religious ceremony in Anbar Province. Also that month, freelance journalist Hilal al-Ahmadi was gunned down outside his home in Mosul. He was known for his reporting on corruption. In March, two journalists working for Al-Arabiya satellite news and the Iraqi news agency Al-Ayn were killed in an attack on a provincial government

building in Tikrit. In April, a sound engineer was killed in bombings in Baghdad, and the director of an Iraqi satellite news channel was shot dead by gunmen as he traveled in Baghdad with a human rights activist. In June, a cameraman was killed in southern Iraq when a car bomb exploded. In September, gunmen using silencers shot journalist and playwright Hadi al-Mahdi in his Baghdad home. Al-Mahdi had hosted a radio show on an independent station that criticized government corruption, bribery, and sectarianism. Past murders of journalists generally went unpunished, leading to a climate of impunity.

Journalists in the semiautonomous region of Kurdistan continued for a second straight year to suffer from violence perpetrated by security forces. Until recently, the region was considered one of the safest places in Iraq, but the creation of a third political party to challenge the two allied ruling parties in 2010 sparked mass demonstrations and led to increasing violence against media outlets that sought to cover the events. Journalists reporting on popular protests in Kurdistan in 2011 consistently faced threats, attacks, and intimidation. For instance, in February gunmen stormed the offices of the independent Naliya Radio and Television to prevent the station from covering unrest. Also in February, guards from a political party forced an independent newspaper to close, shouting that its reporters were traitors who had organized the demonstrations. In September, a magazine editor was assaulted and arrested by security forces, which later filed a defamation suit against him for reporting the incident on the magazine's website. In December, seven media offices suffered arson attacks, and at least 15 journalists were injured or detained for questioning.

Since the ouster of the former regime in 2003, Iraq has been home to hundreds of privately owned television, radio, and print media outlets 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 controlling advertising or pressuring 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.

Five percent of the population had access to the internet in 2011. 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. A draft Informatics Crimes Law proposed in October would prohibit computer use that "compromises the independence of the state or its unity, integrity, safety, or any of its high economic, political, social, military, or security interests." Media rights organizations decried the broad language, saying it could give the authorities a free hand to censor any electronic expression.

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