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## Media targeted in Kurdistan referendum tension

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>After the historic referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan on 25 September and the resulting tension at the local, regional and international levels, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) reminds the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) of the need to safeguard the right to criticize in what is now an increasingly uncertain political environment.

In particular, RSF urges the KRG authorities to preserve media pluralism and pluralism of opinion and to protect the local and international journalists covering the various developments in the region.

*"The authorities must not neglect the public's right of access to freely reported news and information and the right to express critical opinions on matters of general interest, rights that are essential to the democratic debate,"* said Alexandra El Khazen, the head of RSF's Middle East desk.

RSF has compiled a list of violations of the freedom to inform in Kurdistan on the day of the referendum and during the preceding weeks, and of its repercussion beyond Kurdistan's borders.

### Media targeted

On the day of the referendum, Turkey's High Council for Radio and TV Broadcasting (RTÜK) ordered the Turkish satellite operator Turksat to [stop transmitting](#) *Rudaw TV*, a pro-KRG TV channel, and then banned transmission of two other Kurdish TV channels, *Kurdistan 24* and *Waar TV*, on the grounds that they were "dangerous for Turkish national interests."

In Kurdistan, four journalists with *NRT TV* were prevented from entering three voting stations (at the Zhilwan, Qazi Mohamed and Barzani Namir schools) in the city of Erbil. They were also barred from the Hotel Rotana, where several politicians voted.

The ruling Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) has had *NRT TV* in its sights since 2015, and its owner, Shaswar Abdulwahid, campaigned against the referendum. As well as being suspended for eight hours on the eve of the referendum, it has been the target of several attacks and restrictions in recent weeks.

An *NRT TV* crew was [prevented from covering the arrival](#) of the KRG's president (and KDP leader), Masoud Barzani, in Sulaymaniyah on 20 September. *NRT TV*'s bureau in Erbil's Ainkawa district was raided by the security forces in August, just as it was about to open a new studio designed to broadcast referendum-related programmes.

Five days later, *NRT TV* was [suspended for a week](#) in all of the region's cities on the culture ministry's orders. And on 31 August, pro-referendum gunmen [threatened](#) *NRT TV* employees in Duhok and tore down an *NRT TV* poster.

Two other Kurdish TV channels, *Roj News* and *KNN*, were also prevented from covering the address that President Barzani delivered in the city of Kirkuk on 12 September. These media channels, in addition to *Payam TV*, were at several occasions prevented from covering meetings about the referendum in the Kurdistan region or even meetings organized by the Kurdistan referendum delegation in Baghdad.

## Journalists threatened

While the referendum received a great deal of international media coverage, local journalists and activists whose coverage was regarded as critical were the targets of intimidation by unidentified gunmen or by the security forces.

**Mohamad Wali**, a cameraman with *Roj News* (which supports Turkey's outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party, the PKK), was arrested on 20 September while covering a protest against President Barzani's visit to Sulaymaniyah. His equipment was seized and he was held for eight hours.

**Ahmed Shingaly**, a Kurdish journalist of Yazidi origin, reported on Facebook on 6 September that four gunmen had smashed one of the windows of his car while it was parked outside his home. He said the attack was probably a reprisal for his articles about the Yazidi community and his criticism of government corruption and certain corrupt officials.

**Hoshang Kareem**, the host of a daily political programme called "Your Opinion" on the Communist Party-affiliated *Rega TV*, took a call during the programme on 31 August from a person who threatened to kill him and identified himself as a member of an elite Peshmerga unit.

**Sherwan Sherwani**, an outspoken journalist who actively supported the "No to the referendum" campaign, [reported](#) on Facebook on 14 August that he had gone into hiding because he had been threatened and because the security forces were looking for him.

**Ibrahim Abbas**, a freelance journalist who was fired from President Barzani's press office last year and who recently became very critical of the government, especially Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, was beaten up by unidentified gunmen in Erbil on 11 July. He was briefly arrested and threatened in Erbil in May because of what he was posting on social networks.

In June, around 100 journalists and activists [signed a statement](#) criticizing the decision to hold the referendum at a time when the security, economic and political environment was so bad, and voicing concern about the possible repercussions at the national, regional and international levels.

The referendum was effectively banned by Iraq's supreme court and was criticized by a range of countries including Turkey, Iran, Syria and the United States. It was also condemned by the UN Security Council.

Iraq is ranked 158th out of 180 countries in RSF's 2017 World Press Freedom [Index](#).

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