

IRAQI DEFENDERS AFTER

TWENTY YEARS OF CHANGE



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كافة التبعات القانونية ... مع التقدير .



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PROTECT IRAQI HUMAN RIGHTS NOW

Iraqi Defenders after twenty Years of Change

A report about the situation of Iraqi defenders
For the period of (January 2022 - June 2023)

| Issued by
| Protect Human Rights Defenders in Iraq, NOW! Campaign
Written by Hoqoq Observatory for Defenders Protection

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Content

Introduction.....	p4
Executive Summary.....	p6
The political landscape and the Triumph of the losers.....	p8
Systematic violations.....	p10
In the Context of Kurdistan.....	p11
The Protest Movement.....	p13
Assassinations and Assassination Attempts.....	p18
Physical Assault.....	p20
Kidnapping and Forced Disappearance.....	p20
Arbitrary Arrest and Detention.....	p21
Targeting Journalists and Media Professionals.....	p24
Impunity.....	p29
Misusing the Judiciary to Target Defenders.....	p31
Demeaning Content... A Weapon in Whose Hands?!!.....	p34
Recommendations.....	p45

Introduction

Two decades have passed since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's dictatorial regime, which ruled Iraq from 1979 to 2003 when it was toppled by the international coalition forces led by the United States of America. This coalition launched a war on Iraq on March 20, 2003, with the promise of establishing a democratic system as an alternative. As we write this report, twenty years have elapsed since that anniversary, and the Hoqoq Observatory for the Protection of Defenders acknowledges that these years should have been sufficient to bring about substantial changes in the governing system if there had been genuine will to do so. Unfortunately, this period has been marred by significant loss of lives and resources. According to Human Rights Watch, the Iraqi people continue to pay the price of that war, with an estimated half a million fatalities and millions displaced from their homes(1).

Furthermore, the establishment of a distorted political system, which remains in place to this day, has led to significant social and economic problems. Although the intention was to reject dictatorship and choose democracy, the current political system persists, and the Iraqi government remains largely unchanged since 2003. The challenges we face in writing this report within the context of such a government are considerable. Despite the implementation of democratic tools, primarily through elections, the recent procedures adopted by the government to ensure fair democratic elections have raised numerous observations.

The implementation of the law on political parties, which includes a crucial clause prohibiting political parties with armed factions from participating in the political process, is considered a step towards representing a wide spectrum of society. Additionally, the law requires transparency in disclosing sources of funding and their influence on the electoral process, as well as ensuring fair representation through electoral laws. Some argue that the succession of crises, disturbances, armed conflicts, and political disagreements is part of a democratic transition phase, and that Iraq can be considered a democratic country due to the presence of parliamentary elections.

On the International Day of Democracy, Information Center for Research and Development has issued a comprehensive report focusing on democracy within the Iraqi context. It states that "while the peaceful transfer of power represents a significant aspect of democracy, it does not encompass the entirety of the concept. Similarly, the report contends that relying solely on elections as a yardstick for assessing democracy falls short, underscoring the importance of conducting elections that are both free and fair, thus allowing for the genuine expression of the people's or community's voice. The report further argues that elections may not be the most suitable starting point for a democratic transition without the establishment of robust political parties and the disarmament of armed movements. The absence of these critical elements makes it arduous to convince election losers of the legitimacy of the results, resulting in voters resorting to voting based on ethnic and religious identities as their only choice."



The purpose of this report is to shed light on the reality faced by human rights defenders in Iraq during the period of 2022-2023. This report serves as a follow-up to the first edition, which focused on defenders three years after the October 2019 uprising. Before delving into their reality, it is important to define who we are referring to as human rights defenders.

Human rights defenders are individuals who work non-violently to promote and protect the civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights of others. In Iraq, these defenders play a crucial role in raising awareness about people's rights, particularly the right to freedom of expression, assembly, and peaceful protest. In 2019, a massive protest movement led by young people emerged primarily in central and southern provinces, where human rights defenders played a central role in organizing demonstrations and promoting nonviolent resistance principles.

The impact of their role becomes evident when examining the excessive violence directed towards protesters, and the unwavering determination of these defenders to choose peaceful protest as their only recourse, despite incidents that elicited objections from protesters. The response from government authorities and armed groups to the protests was characterized by violence and brutality. Numerous protesters were injured, abducted by armed groups, illegally detained, tortured, and increasingly subjected to assassination attempts. Consequently, a significant number of human rights defenders were forced to flee their cities and towns, seeking refuge in other parts of Iraq or even other countries.

Recognized by the campaign «Protect Human Rights Defenders in Iraq, Now!», these individuals, groups, or organizations work legitimately to promote and protect human rights through peaceful and non-violent means. Through their efforts, they help expose human rights violations, raise public awareness, and advocate for fair and just solutions.

The report we present relies on sources provided by the Hoqoq Observatory for Defenders Protection, a platform dedicated to monitoring and documenting violations in Iraq. Additionally, this report draws on other international and local sources.

It is important to note that this report covers the period from January 2022 to June of the current year. The Hoqoq Observatory for Defenders Protection acknowledges that numerous violations and abuses likely occurred during this timeframe. However, the observatory's ability to verify these incidents to the extent required by its specific monitoring, verification, and analysis standards has been limited. Nevertheless, this report serves as a foundation for further documentation and more comprehensive reporting in the future.

Executive Summary

«Every year, rights are protected, and the dignity of Iraqis is preserved, and all human rights defenders are well-wished.»

With this statement, Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia Al-Sudani concluded [his statement on the occasion of International Human Rights Day in 2022](#). However, it is crucial to examine whether rights are genuinely being protected.

The «Protect Human Rights Defenders in Iraq, NOW!» campaign deeply regrets to acknowledge that the overall human rights situation in Iraq, particularly for human rights defenders, has witnessed a continuous deterioration during the period covered by this report. There has been an alarming escalation in the crackdown on public and political freedoms, with violations against activists, defenders, and their organizations increasing in ways that contradict constitutional rights and violate national and international laws and conventions in this field. Moreover, there has been a shift in the nature of violations, particularly with repressive and suppressive practices that unfolded during the October 2019 uprising, which exposed the political forces in power since 2003 and challenged their claims of having produced a democratic system after April 2003.

This hypothesis is still under scrutiny and requires further investigation. Intensified monitoring and documentation of overall violations, their methods, and motives, especially those driven by political interests, are essential. This is precisely the focus of the «Hoqoq Observatory for Defenders Protection» in this report.

The report meticulously documents the excessive use of force in response to peaceful protests with social, political, and economic underpinnings in Baghdad and several provinces. It sheds light on arbitrary arrests, threats, and assassinations targeting active participants in the protests. From January 2022 to June 2023, these actions resulted in 25 deaths and 345 injuries. Additionally, three assassination attempts targeted activists and human rights defenders, one of which was unsuccessful. Seven cases of arbitrary abduction and detention were recorded, with nine cases brought to trial, four of which resulted in death sentences based on politically motivated fabricated charges.

Furthermore, one case involved the kidnapping and brutal assault of three activists and human rights defenders. The report strongly recommends that all security forces provide protection to protesters and enforce the law in line with international standards regarding the use of force and weapons. It emphasizes the crucial importance of the Iraqi government conducting impartial and fair investigations into all cases of killings targeting protesters and activists. Justice must be sought for the victims and their families, and the perpetrators and their accomplices must be brought to trial. Urgent review of sentences, especially death sentences, against detainees is urged. A responsible national approach is required to handle these cases and take prompt measures to unconditionally release detainees. Additionally, the report calls for holding accountable those responsible



for the abduction and threats against activists and human rights defenders and putting an end to all forms and methods of intimidation.

Throughout the period covered by the report, various violations targeted media outlets, journalists, and prominent media figures who opposed the methods employed by the government, its security apparatus, and affiliated armed forces. The report documented 17 cases targeting journalists and media professionals, as well as 7 cases targeting media institutions and their staff. Two journalists were arrested while carrying out their journalistic work, arrest warrants were issued against three individuals, and one journalist received summons. A prominent media figure had their services terminated. Legal actions were taken against two journalists and program presenters. Additionally, incidents included assault on a journalist's residence and intimidation of their family, attempted assassinations using explosive devices targeting two journalists, and injuries sustained by three journalists working for a media institution. The report also noted the arrest of Al Jazeera staff members and the prevention of government-owned Al Iraqiya and Alhurra Baghdad channel staff from media coverage. Unlawful intrusion into Channel 4's office, targeting of UTV channel, and the closure of Al Furat channel's office in Basra were also recorded.

Therefore, the report emphasizes the importance of respecting the right to freedom of opinion, expression, and peaceful assembly. Anticipated violations from governmental and non-governmental entities must be prevented, and media institutions and outlets should not be restricted. They should be protected from harm, and encroachments upon them must be halted. Non-interference in the work of media outlets reporting on protests and the experiences of human rights defenders is essential. Furthermore, necessary measures should be taken to investigate threats and intimidation targeting journalists and bloggers on social media platforms, and those responsible for their actions must be held accountable. It is important to note that rights and freedoms are constitutionally safeguarded and protected under national, regional, and international laws, treaties, and conventions that Iraq has ratified and committed to implementing. The government of Mr. Al-Sudani must prioritize ending all forms of violations and demonstrate genuine adherence to the constitution, while ensuring the protection of defenders, activists, and their organizations. Accountability for those involved in suppressing protests, intimidating activists and defenders is imperative, and all forms of violations must be halted to fulfill Iraq's obligations regarding civil, political, economic, and social rights.

The political Landscape and the Triumph of the losers

On October 10, 2021, early elections were held in Iraq, which was one of the primary demands of the protesters during the October 2019 uprising. This came after the resignation of Adel Abdul Mahdi's government and the formation of an interim government led by Mustafa al-Kadhimi, the former head of the Iraqi Intelligence Service.

In those elections, the Sadr movement emerged as the largest bloc in terms of seats, winning 73 seats. This renewed the political conflict regarding the concept of the largest bloc and its interpretations by the court. The Sadr bloc insisted on a «political majority government,» while others advocated for a «national partnership government.» However, political dialogue was interrupted, and conflicts between different political forces, personalities, and blocs participating in the negotiations hindered progress. This was particularly evident between Muqtada al-Sadr, his Sadr movement, and the parties of the «Coordination Framework,» which brought together al-Sadr's political opponents within the Shiite sphere.

Negotiations among political forces continued for an extended period, with several names proposed as candidates for the Prime Minister's position. Despite the negotiations, the crisis persisted until the Sadr movement, under al-Sadr's direction, announced their withdrawal from the Council of Representatives in June 2022, eight months after the onset of the political complexities and crises. This created an opportunity for other political forces, represented by the parties of the «Coordination Framework,» to reassess their positions and rally behind Mr. Mohammed Shia' Al-Sudani as a consensus candidate. His nomination received majority approval from the Iraqi Council of Representatives in October 2022, over a year after the early elections were held.

These elections witnessed a voter turnout of 43%, the lowest since the change in 2003. The elections, originally scheduled for 2022, aimed to address public anger, combat corruption, improve public services, and address economic deterioration.

These events unfolded alongside security tensions among conflicting parties vying for power, resulting in significant casualties. On July 27, 2022, thousands of supporters of the Sadrist Movement stormed the Iraqi Parliament building and occupied it until evening, following Muqtada al-Sadr's request. Three days later,



on July 30, 2022, protesters once again stormed the Iraqi Parliament building and staged a sit-in after clashes with security forces stationed in the Green Zone. According to a statement by the Ministry of Health published in the Iraqi News Agency, a total of 125 individuals were injured, including 100 civilians and 25 military personnel(2).

The sit-in led by Muqtada al-Sadr lasted for a month before it concluded. This followed a day of violent confrontations that erupted on the night of August 28-29, 2022, following al-Sadr's announcement of his withdrawal from political activities. Hundreds of his supporters demonstrated inside and outside the Green Zone and clashed with security forces of the Popular Mobilization Forces. These clashes resulted in the death of more than 22 protesters and the injury of over 200, causing significant security turmoil. A curfew was imposed in Baghdad on that day.

Muqtada al-Sadr held a press conference in the Al-Hannana area in the Najaf Governorate, where he expressed regret, stating, «Regardless of who initiated the discord yesterday, I walk with a lowered head, and I apologize to the Iraqi people who are the sole victims of what is happening. The killer and the killed are both engulfed in hell.»

He further stated, «I still believe that the Sadr Movement is obedient, and if it does not withdraw from the sit-in in front of the parliament within 60 minutes, then I will disassociate myself from the movement.» Al-Sadr affirmed that «there will be no peaceful protests anymore, and we do not want them.» Regarding his decision to retire from politics, he declared it to be «a final decision with no turning back.»

Following his speech, the clashes and gunfire inside the Green Zone and other areas ceased, and Sadr's supporters immediately began to withdraw from the zone and other regions(3).

Systematic violations

It is evident that the nature of violations against human rights defenders in Iraq has undergone changes compared to the period following October 2019. The scale of violations may also vary. However, as the Hoqoq Observatory for Defenders Protection, we maintain that the fundamental essence of the violation remains unchanged, and there is a lack of genuine intention on the part of the authorities to address restrictions and encroachments on freedoms. The recurring pattern of repression and the absence of accountability among successive governments are consistent themes. Despite government statements on accountability, Amnesty International highlighted this issue in March 2023, urging the Sudanese government to translate its human rights discourse into concrete actions and effective measures(4).

The Hoqoq Observatory for Defenders Protection believes that the variation in the forms of violations can be attributed to several factors. The ruling powers have recognized the risks posed by human rights defenders and their advocacy campaigns against the violations they face. Consequently, the authorities have resorted to a renewed tactic of using the law to curtail freedoms. Defenders now focus on specific issues such as the environment, water scarcity, impunity, rampant corruption, and the need for accountability for violators. This has forced the authorities to employ threats, blackmail, and malicious lawsuits against defenders.

Furthermore, the varying degree of disturbances has resulted in different levels of violations. In October 2019, violations were widespread and arbitrary. The current government, led by Mohammed Shia' Al-Sudani, is striving to safeguard its reputation regarding human rights and freedom of opinion and expression, both domestically and internationally, particularly with the upcoming provincial council elections scheduled for late 2023. Additionally, the government has created hundreds of thousands of job positions for the youth, aiming to pacify some and mitigate the public anger stemming from the lack of services, high poverty rates, and unemployment. This coincides with the rise in oil prices and initial satisfaction with the government among certain segments of the population. Furthermore, the heightened political awareness in 2023 and the emergence of new political associations and parties differentiate the current situation from that of 2019.



In the Context of Kurdistan

The population of Kurdistan is estimated to be around 6,033,000 individuals, including 1.2 million government employees. The region requires a monthly sum of 895 billion Iraqi dinars (approximately \$614 million) for salary distribution, amounting to an annual total of approximately 10 trillion and 740 billion Iraqi dinars (approximately \$7 billion and 368 million).

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq relies on three main sources of public revenue: its share from the federal general budget, revenues from oil sales, and non-oil revenues generated through taxes, fees, and customs duties.

Former Kurdish deputy Ghalib Muhammad Ali highlighted the misallocation of oil revenues and the control exerted by familial and partisan forces as causes of the salary crisis. He stated to Al Jazeera that the region depends on oil revenues for 85-90% of its income, producing 500,000 barrels per day, which results in monthly revenues of \$1.2 billion based on 2022 prices. Meanwhile, the total salary expenses amount to approximately \$600 million.

Ali accuses the influential ruling parties in the region of appropriating 60% of these revenues, totaling \$14.4 billion annually. This has led to an ongoing salary crisis that significantly impacts the Kurdistan economy and its employees.

It is worth noting that the absence of a law guaranteeing the rights of workers in the private sector hampers the region's development process (5).

The popular protests and demonstrations that unfolded in Iraq were not limited to the central and southern regions but extended to the Kurdistan region as well. On Saturday, August 6, 2022, large-scale demonstrations took place on Sulaymaniyah's famous Moulawi Street. The protests were organized by Shaswar Abdulwahid, the leader of the New Generation Movement, who demanded changes in the governance system and ruling mechanisms in the Kurdistan region. Some protesters called for storming the Parliament building, following a similar scenario to the Sadr Movement's storming of the Iraqi Parliament in Baghdad, where they declared an open sit-in until their demands, voiced by Muqtada al-Sadr, were met. As a result, security forces were heavily deployed in the city center before the start of the protest. Tear gas was used to disperse the protesters, and media outlets were prevented from reaching the protest site. Citizens were also

prohibited from using mobile phones, even for calls, with immediate arrest for violators. Furthermore, commercial shops on the street closed their doors once the protest began. The day after, Sarwa Abdulwahid, head of the New Generation Bloc, stated that the demonstrations in Sulaymaniyah were peaceful popular protests, similar to those occurring in the streets of Baghdad, demanding services and economic reforms. She noted that despite calls for peaceful protests, the regional authorities suppressed the demonstrations, resulting in the arrest of over 600 individuals by security forces in various cities of the region. Abdulwahid emphasized that the protests in the region would continue until the demands of the people of Kurdistan were met, stating that the incident revealed the ruling parties' fear of the people's voice. Among those detained were deputies, journalists, and activists (6).

The protest movement arose due to a lack of job opportunities, with reports indicating several injuries during the protests. The Asayish forces, the security apparatus affiliated with the Kurdistan Regional Government, briefly detained at least 20 journalists for their coverage of the protests.

Throughout 2022, two journalists and three political activists staged hunger strikes three times. They had been detained since 2020 and were convicted in February 2021 on charges related to national security. Their hunger strikes were a form of protest against their prolonged detention.

The New Generation Movement, an opposition party that called for the protests, reported that the Asayish forces arrested dozens of its members from their homes or during the protests in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah. After several days of detention, they were released on bail without being informed of the charges against them.

In September 2022, the Asayish forces arrested a journalist working for an opposition-affiliated media outlet while covering an attack by a Turkish drone targeting Kurdistan Workers' Party fighters in Erbil province. He was released the following day without any charges after signing a commitment not to cover similar incidents. In October, two journalists were arrested near Erbil under the ambiguous wording of the 2008 law on combating the misuse of electronic devices, which has been previously used to prosecute individuals for publishing content critical of officials. They were released by the end of the month (7).

It has been observed that authorities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq exploit broadly defined laws to target individuals expressing their opinions and criticizing matters they disagree with (8).



The Protest Movement

«Human rights today constitute an integral part of the Iraqi government's ongoing efforts to safeguard the human dignity of its citizens.»

This statement was made by Judge Salar Abdul Sattar Mohammed, the former Iraqi Minister of Justice, during [his speech on the occasion of the International Human Rights Day in 2021](#).

The protest movement continues in most provinces of Iraq, employing various means. Peaceful demonstrations have become one of the strategies utilized by Iraqi advocates to voice their concerns on various issues. This right is protected by all laws, international conventions, national constitutions, and regulations. It is not restricted to specific regions or particular groups. Whenever individuals witness injustice, negligence, or violations of their rights and freedoms by those in power, corresponding reactions commensurate with the scale of the violations are necessary.

During the period from 2022 to the first half of 2023, numerous protests and disturbances have occurred in various cities across Iraq. The number of protests exceeds 20 movements. We have documented some of them with detailed information based on accurate available data. However, due to insufficient information, we have refrained from providing specific details on other demonstrations and disturbances.

1. On January 8, 2022, armed assailants attacked protesters in Wasit province as they took to the streets demanding accountability for the killers of protesters and opposing the control of political parties and armed groups over government institutions in the province. A video shared on Twitter by Iraqi Parliament member Sajad Salem shows individuals dressed in military attire assaulting the protesters and firing live ammunition at them. The deputy commented, «The authority of the state is facing a real test today (9).»
2. On January 11, 2022, riot police forces assaulted a group of student protesters in the capital city of Baghdad (10).
3. On March 8, 2022, armed individuals from the protection of MP Soha Al-Sultani attacked a group of protesters with stones, sticks, and live ammunition, resulting in the injury of six individuals, including activist Dr. Dargham Majid Mahdi, in Al-Qasim district of Babil province. The Babil Police Command confirmed the incident in a statement, mentioning that a comprehensive investigation has been opened to determine the circumstances of the attack on six protesters,

including Dr. Dargham. Initial information suggests that the attack involved throwing stones, using sticks, and firing live ammunition. The casualties were limited to five protesters sustaining varying injuries from stones and sticks, and the sixth protester being injured by a gunshot. It is worth noting that the Ministry of Interior - Babil Operations Command deleted the statement from Facebook, but we obtained a verified copy of the statement, which was also published on the Iraqi News Agency website (11).

4. On May 18, 2022, a group of volunteer lecturers, who had provided significant services to the Iraqi government, staged a protest in Al-Muthanna province, demanding permanent government positions. They were advocating for their rights. However, they were subjected to serious violations by the security forces, who brutally assaulted them, leaving visible signs of torture on their bodies (12).

5. On July 23, 2022, security forces in Samawah city, the capital of Al-Muthanna province, suppressed a peaceful march organized by graduates and unemployed individuals (13).

6. On July 27, 2022, a group of protesters closed the Al-Mufawwadhah Bridge and Al-Qashla Intersection in Samawah city in solidarity with their fellow graduates and unemployed individuals who had been suppressed, demanding the removal of Governor Ahmed Manfi(14). On August 2, 2022, the Central Committee for Demonstrations held a meeting in the Dabouni district, affiliated with Al-Azizia district in Wasit province, with the participation of representatives from central and southern provinces, as well as a large number of protesters who had participated in the widespread popular movement that started on October 1, 2019. Following the meeting, they issued a statement stating, «We will organize a separate major demonstration on August 5, 2022, inviting all the people of Iraq to participate and come out strongly under the slogan: #FridayOfFlippingTheEquation» (15).

7. On August 6, 2022, security forces used force to disperse a protest organized by residents of Al-Kahla district in Maysan province, where the local residents demanded access to water, electricity, and job opportunities. Reliable local sources confirmed that the local authorities suspended internet services on the same day in an attempt to prevent coordination among the protesters to continue their demonstrations (16).

8. On September 28, 2022, a massive protest took place in Tahrir Square in central Baghdad, protesting the parliamentary session that witnessed the renewal of confidence in the Council's President, Mohammed Al-Halbousi, and the selection of Mohsen Al-Mandlawi as the First Deputy. Clashes occurred between the protesters and security forces, resulting in the injury of 11 civilians (17).

9. Later on the same day, security forces intensified their presence in the vicinity of the Green Zone and closed the Sinak and al-Jumhuriya bridges, which lead to the Green Zone, with cement barriers. Military forces also deployed in several intersections and bridges in eastern Baghdad, specifically at the entrance of Sadr City, Al-Balidiat Town, Al-Jaysh Canal, Muthafar Square, Ur intersection, and Al-Bunook area, leaving only one access point open for movement. Iraqi security



sources stated that the main roads in Baghdad were closed as part of a strict security plan aimed at securing potential protests and the parliamentary session. They clarified that «Baghdad has been divided into three sections, with over 70% of roads and bridges out of service.» Additionally, the entire Green Zone and the main entrances to the capital were completely closed (18).

10. On October 1, 2022, protests erupted in Tahrir Square and Al-Nusoor Square in central Baghdad, amidst heavy deployment of security forces, to commemorate the third anniversary of the October 2019 uprising. According to security sources, 28 cases of suffocation were reported among the protesters after security forces fired tear gas canisters to disperse the demonstrators (19). Private sources and interviews with protesters indicate that security forces pelted the demonstrators with stones and launched glass balls through a primitive hunting tool. They also heavily deployed gas and sound grenades. Witnesses reported the use of a hunting shotgun in the evening, aimed at dispersing the protesters. Several protesters were arrested and released shortly after, possibly as an intimidation tactic to quell the protests. The number of suffocation cases and injuries among the protesters increased, including head and facial injuries. One protester's hand was amputated (the palm with a portion of the lower elbow) due to the explosion of a sound grenade, which he mistakenly carried, believing it to be a smoke grenade. Amidst all these events, it was noticed that ambulances were prevented from entering the collision site near the Republic or Tahrir Bridge. The nearest ambulance was located more than half a kilometer away under the bridge, while other ambulances were over a kilometer away from the aviation side. Some Civil Defense ambulances were allowed to enter after 6 PM due to the high number and severity of injuries (20).

11. On the evening of December 7, 2022, a gathering of peaceful protesters took place in Al-Habubi Square in the city of Nasiriyah, the capital of Dhi Qar Governorate in southern Iraq. They were expressing their condemnation of the three-year prison sentence imposed on activist Haider al-Zaidi, while corrupt individuals and the killers of protesters roamed freely. The protesters demanded his immediate release. However, the security forces opened fire on them, resulting in the deaths of peaceful protesters Ali Razaq al-Yasiri and Mohammed Samir al-Athmawi, as well as the injury of 21 others. This marked the first lethal targeting of peaceful protesters during the tenure of the new Prime Minister, Mohammed Shia' Al-Sudani, who was elected on October 27, 2022. With their martyrdom, the total number of victims in the protests in Dhi Qar Governorate, which continued for over three years, has reached more than 140 martyrs and over 5,000 injured due to the excessive use of violence, live ammunition, explosives, and smoke bombs. Non-governmental organizations and activists estimate that the overall number of victims of the crackdown on protests in Iraq is around 800 martyrs and 25,000 injured.

With the change of the Dhi Qar Police Chief, Major General Saad Ati Al-Harbiya, and his replacement with Colonel Maki Shnaa, Dhi Qar Governorate has witnessed

a change and the dismissal of the tenth security and military commander since the outbreak of the protests on October 1, 2019. Major General Hassan Al-Zaidi was dismissed due to his involvement in suppressing the protests and was replaced by Colonel Mohammed Abdul Wahab Al-Saadi, who was later dismissed and replaced by Major General Mohammed Al-Quraishi (Abu Al-Walid). Subsequently, Major General Risan Kassid Al-Ibrahimi took over, followed by Colonel Nasser Al-Asadi. Al-Asadi was then replaced by Brigadier General Hazim Al-Waeli, who was subsequently replaced by Major General Ouda Al-Jabri. Major General Muayad Farhan then assumed the position, only to be replaced by Major General Saad Ati Al-Harbiya, who was assigned as the Police Chief of Dhi Qar Governorate in addition to leading the operations in Sumer. This is in addition to the removal of Major General Jameel Al-Shammari, who held the position of Crisis Cell President and Security File Manager in Dhi Qar, due to his involvement and the involvement of his forces in the Zaitun Bridge massacre, which resulted in the deaths of approximately 50 protesters and more than 500 injured (21).

On December 14, 2022, the official spokesperson for the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, Major General Yahya Rasul, published several tweets on his Twitter account regarding the results of the investigation into the targeting of protesters. One of the tweets stated that the «main perpetrator of the incident has been identified, and he is a member of the security apparatus.» This case has become a recurring pattern in most investigations involving perpetrators of violations against activists and human rights defenders, who are often affiliated with the security forces (22).

12. On January 25, 2023, thousands of citizens gathered in front of the Central Bank of Iraq building on Rashid Street in the heart of the capital, Baghdad, to protest against the high exchange rate of the dollar and the rising prices of food commodities. The value of the dollar has surpassed 1,700 Iraqi dinars in recent weeks, compared to being less than 1,500 dinars previously, leading to chaos in the Iraqi market. Despite Prime Minister Mohammed Shia Al-Sudani affirming the government's determination to restore the dollar exchange rate to its original level, this has not been achieved so far (23).

13. On February 27, 2023, popular demonstrations took place in front of the Green Zone in the heart of the capital, Baghdad, against the new election law. Dozens of citizens participated in the protests. The Parliament voted on a portion of its provisions during a session held on the morning of March 20, 2023. The law reinforces the influence of the major parties currently in power and restricts the participation of emerging parties. Amid massive sit-ins at the gates of the Green Zone and widespread public discontent, the Parliament failed several times to hold its session on March 25 and 26, 2023. After continuous attempts by the ruling parties to convene a session and pass the proposed law, they managed to achieve the required legal quorum on the evening of March 26, 2023, and successfully passed it. Deputies who objected to the law faced arbitrary measures by the Speaker of the Iraqi Parliament, Mohammed Al-Halbousi, and were forcibly expelled from the



meeting hall. They were also chased in the corridors of the Parliament building by the security details of other deputies within the coordination framework. Some of them were subjected to physical assault, as live broadcasts on Facebook showed, streamed by Deputy Alaa Al-Rikabi from the Extension Bloc (24).

Assassinations and Assassination Attempts

Iraq continues to witness an alarming pattern of assassinations and killings targeting activists and defenders, despite the Iraqi government's promises to protect them. Regrettably, the government has failed to fulfill its commitments to safeguard these individuals and hold the perpetrators accountable.

1. On January 26, 2022, the body of activist Haider Sabri was discovered in Basra, with a gunshot wound to the head. This grim discovery occurred two days after his mysterious disappearance. The Basra Police Directorate released a statement claiming the incident was purely criminal and implicated his brother in the killing, citing a family dispute (25). Haider Sabri played a prominent role in the October 2019 protests.

2. On June 30, 2022, unknown armed individuals murdered activist Jameel Suleiman (40 years old) in the Sinjar district. His body was found in an unfinished building located in the Duhola complex, approximately 17 kilometers from his home in the Snuni sub-district of Sinjar. The «Protect Human Rights Defenders in Iraq Now!» campaign issued a statement demanding the identification and prosecution of the perpetrators (26). Jameel Suleiman was affiliated with the Gilan organization, a civil society organization established in 2019 that focuses on care and rehabilitation. He also held positions within the Ezidi House Foundation, a religious and social institution aiding the needy and victims of war. Furthermore, he was a member of the Independent Youth Assembly of Sinjar, advocating for the withdrawal of all armed forces from the Sinjar district.

3. On January 27, 2023, human rights defender Abbas Kamel Al-Jabri, aged 26, survived an assassination attempt near his residence in Suq Al-Shuyukh city, Dhi Qar Governorate. He was shot at by individuals riding a motorcycle but managed to avoid serious injuries by throwing himself to the ground. He received necessary medical treatment at a hospital(27).

It is important to note that Al-Jabri had faced repeated threats due to his refusal to withdraw a legal complaint he filed against suspects involved in the killing of his brother, Hamza Kamel Al-Jabri, a peaceful protester who lost his life during the protests on Al-Zeitoun Bridge in Al-Nasiriyah on November 28, 2019.

4. On March 17, 2023, in the morning, surveillance cameras captured footage of two individuals riding a motorcycle approaching Dr. Aqeel Abdullah Al-Nasiri, a professor at the Open Educational College, near his home in the military neighborhood of Al-Nasiriyah. As Dr. Al-Nasiri was heading to deliver a lecture, one of the individuals fired shots at him from a pistol. Tragically, he succumbed to his



injuries at the hospital (28). The Dean of the Open Educational College issued a statement mourning his loss, describing Dr. Al-Nasiri as a person of high moral values, professional integrity, and academic dedication.

Dr. Al-Nasiri utilized his Facebook page to express personal opinions about the country's situation. On December 1, 2022, he wrote the following:

«Where is Nasiriya heading??? Nasiriya, which fought against all corrupt ruling parties that wasted innocent lives before wealth... It is simply paying the price for that war.»

Physical Assault

1. On January 14, 2022, activist Haider Al-Salehi in Dhi Qar Governorate, southern Iraq, was violently attacked by an unidentified group using sticks and sharp objects. According to reliable local sources, the incident occurred during the protests in the province when unidentified individuals in a sedan intercepted the activist's vehicle. The assault took place on Al-Eskan Al-Qadim Street in Nasiriyah, the provincial center, resulting in severe fractures and injuries to his body. Al-Salehi was promptly transported to the hospital for necessary medical treatment (29).
2. On April 14, 2022, a video circulated on Facebook depicting the brutal assault on activist Ali Ghaleb, also known as Abu Ayyah Al-Sa'idi. The assailants were reportedly members affiliated with the protection team of the municipal director in Al-Shatra district, Dhi Qar Governorate. Al-Sa'idi utilizes his Facebook page to shed light on deficiencies in the projects implemented by the local government, particularly focusing on healthcare services provided to the district's residents (30).

Kidnapping and Forced Disappearance

On February 1, 2023, the renowned environmental activist Jassim Al-Asadi, an expert in environmental issues, water, and marshland protection, was forcibly abducted. The kidnapping took place at the southern entrance of Baghdad while he was en route to the city. Al-Asadi has long been recognized for his unwavering dedication to environmental work and the preservation of marshlands in southern Iraq.

Jassim Al-Asadi, an expert in environmental affairs, has been an advocate, researcher, and environmental specialist for years, tirelessly striving for the protection of Iraqi rivers and marshlands and advocating for Iraq's rightful share of water resources. The «Protect Human Rights Defenders in Iraq, NOW!» campaign has released a statement condemning the incident and calling upon the authorities to disclose information about the whereabouts of their colleague.

Fortunately, on February 15, 2023, Jassim Al-Asadi, the environmental activist, was



released after being held captive for a duration of fifteen days by an unknown armed group near the southern entrance of Baghdad. Al-Asadi confirmed his release through an audio recording that was disseminated by the media.

Throughout the enforced disappearance of Mr. Jassim Al-Asadi, the «Protect Human Rights Defenders in Iraq Now» campaign closely monitored the statements and actions of the government. However, following his release, there has been a lack of detailed information regarding the circumstances of his abduction or the identity of the perpetrators. It remains uncertain whether those responsible will be held accountable for their actions. Regrettably, as of the preparation of this report, the Iraqi government or any other official entity has not provided any clarification on this matter.

The abduction of Mr. Jassim Al-Asadi serves as a reminder of the cases of enforced disappearances and abductions endured by other activists and human rights defenders, including Mazen Latif and Tawfiq Al-Tamimi, since the October 2019 protests. Unfortunately, there have been no conclusive outcomes from government investigation committees or decisive measures taken against the entities accountable for these grave actions.

Arbitrary Arrest and Detention

1. On June 6, 2022, activist Haider Al-Zaidi was arrested in Basra by security forces due to his tweets expressing his opinions on Twitter. He was released on bail on June 19, 2022, as he announced in a video circulated on social media, stating that his arrest was carried out based on a judicial warrant.

2. In the early morning of June 2, 2022, activist Ahmed Mahlhal was arrested in Basra, southern Iraq, due to his peaceful activism and active participation in the popular movement. His arrest, along with the intimidation and harassment faced by his family during the early hours, led to a deterioration in the health of his mother, who was subsequently hospitalized for treatment, as shown in a video shared by one of his family members on Facebook (31).

Following his arrest and detention, lawyer Zain Al-Basri expressed the following on his Facebook account: «The people of Basra should raise their voices. He was arrested based on unsubstantiated charges. The decision to arrest him was arbitrary, and

the implementation was intimidating and terrifying for his family.» He further added, «They extended his detention after interrogating him and attempted to portray his arrest as personal actions aimed at limiting his freedom and tarnishing his reputation. They even harassed the lawyers representing him.» He concluded his post with the following statement: «Lastly, they revived an invitation that was previously canceled for all activists during the 2018 protests. The injustice that Ahmed Mahlhal is facing is undeniable. There is no justice in this country. Those advocating for freedom of expression and human rights must speak out. Basra must stand against the oppression and injustice targeting these rights guaranteed by the constitution» (32).

3. On June 11, 2022, security forces in the city of Basra arrested activists Ammar Al-Zaidi, representing the 30,000 contract workers, and Wasim Al-Tamimi, representing the contract workers of the Basra Health Directorate. They were arrested due to their participation in peaceful demonstrations demanding the permanent employment of contract workers (33).

4. On June 13, 2022, citizen Ryan Salem, the father of the peaceful protester Raymond who was killed by security forces, was arrested. It is believed that his arrest is related to the complaint filed by the family with the French judiciary against former Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi regarding the murder of their son.

5. On December 12, 2022, in the early morning, security forces conducted a raid on the residence of prominent human rights defender and protest leader Amar Hameed Rashid Al-Khazaali in the city of Diwaniyah. He was taken into custody and held at the Sunniyah Police Station. Following his arrest, several human rights defenders and civil society organizations issued a call stating, «We demand the Iraqi government to provide the necessary physical and legal protection for Amar Al-Khazaali and to release him immediately, in line with Iraq's international human rights commitments.» The call also emphasized that «the arrest contradicts the Prime Minister's stated commitment in his government agenda to encourage the filing of complaints regarding human rights violations and to refrain from extracting confessions through force or subjecting individuals to torture and degrading treatment.» He was later released on bail on the same day due to the strong solidarity campaign (34).

In a previous incident, Amar Al-Khazaali was the target of an assassination attempt on October 22, 2020, when an explosive device was planted at his residence. Simultaneously, gunmen opened fire on his house, indicating a clear assassination attempt (35).

6. On March 26, 2023, security forces arrested political analyst Mohammed Naana'a Hassan in the Al-Karrada district of central Baghdad. Reliable local sources confirmed that the arrest was based on a complaint filed by Prime Minister



Mohammed Shia Al-Sudani, accusing him of making verbal attacks prior to assuming office when he was a candidate for the prime minister position.

Mohammed Naana'a had criticized Al-Sudani during an episode of the TV program «Al-Qarar Lakum» (The Decision is Yours), hosted by journalist Sahar Abbas Jameel on Dijlah TV channel. The episode was aired on August 30, 2022, where Naana'a made several allegations against Al-Sudani, including being influenced by certain party leaders in power.

Targeting Journalists and Media professionals

Freedom of expression in Iraq faces significant risks due to the prevailing political tensions in the country and the exploitation of influence by certain politicians within state institutions to intimidate journalists, media professionals, and individuals with dissenting opinions. In recent times, several incidents have occurred where individuals have faced lawsuits and arrest warrants.

1. On April 7, 2022, media presenter Ahmed Mala Talal announced on his Twitter page that a judicial arrest warrant had been issued against him and actor Iyad Al-Attieh. He stated, «While our government pardons a convicted drug dealer, it exerts pressure on the judiciary, obtaining arrest warrants and launching investigations against me and you.»

The Iraqi Ministry of Defense had filed a complaint against his program, «Ma»a Mala Talal,» which he presents on UTV satellite channel, with the Media and Communications Commission. Subsequently, the commission decided to suspend the program's broadcast after it aired a theatrical scene involving Al-Attieh addressing corruption within the ministry.

On April 10, 2022, after a brief hearing, the Third Al-Karkh Investigative Court decided to release Mala Talal and Al-Attieh on personal recognizance.

2. On April 8, 2022, the Iraqi Media Network terminated the services of journalist and writer Saleh Al-Hamdani due to a tweet he posted on his Twitter account on the same day. Despite apologizing for the misunderstanding caused by his tweet to some citizens, Al-Hamdani's tweet generated significant discontent among certain political leaders. They called on the Iraqi Media Network to hold him accountable, incite his punishment, and terminate his services.

On April 9, 2022, Al-Hamdani posted a note on his Twitter account stating, «Regarding my work at Al-Iraqiya channel, which I am proud of, it has a beginning and it must have an end someday, like any media work in this troubled country.» He attached a screenshot of the tweet that led to his termination from his job.

Al-Hamdani is a well-known journalist, writer, and presenter who has hosted several programs on various television channels. He uses his Facebook page and Twitter account to express his opinions on political affairs and other matters concerning



Iraqi citizens.

3. On May 19, 2022, the Al-Karrada Investigative Court issued a summons against Mustafa Al-Rubaie, the host of the program «Al-Watan Wal-Nas» on Al-Iraqiya channel, following a lawsuit filed against him by politician Hadi Al-Ameri. Al-Rubaie stated on his Twitter account, «I will appear before the Iraqi judiciary due to a personal lawsuit filed by Mr. Hadi Al-Ameri in accordance with Article 434 of the Penal Code, and yesterday I signed the notification paper in person» (36).

4. On May 29, 2022, he tweeted the following, «Today, I appeared before the Investigative Court with full confidence in the Iraqi judiciary. I provided my statement regarding the charges against me... The court released me on personal recognizance after appointing a lawyer for me. There will be upcoming sessions to decide on the case in which the complainant alleges defamation, slander, and harm.»

5. On May 24, 2022, host of the program «Studio Al-Taseea» on Al-Baghdadia channel, Ali Al-Dhbaawi, was arrested by a security force in Baghdad. He was released hours later without knowing the reasons for his arrest or the specific authority that detained him. It is believed that influential political entities within the state were behind Al-Dhbaawi's arrest due to his programs that criticize corruption and the influence of militias in Iraq. This is not the first time he has been arrested. Previously, on July 27, 2021, security forces raided the headquarters of Al-Baghdadia channel and arrested Al-Dhbaawi and others (37).

6. On June 2, 2022, the Supreme Judicial Council issued an arrest warrant against writer and journalist Sarmad Al-Ta'i following his appearance in an episode of the talk show «Al-Muhayyid» hosted by journalist Saadoun Muhsin Damad on the official Iraqi channel. The episode was aired on June 1, 2022, and in it, Al-Ta'i criticized the judicial authority (38).

According to the document, the Supreme Judicial Council addressed the Iraqi Journalists Syndicate through the First Al-Karkh Investigation Court, requesting them to «take legal action against the journalist (Sarmad Al-Ta'i) on charges of insulting the judicial institution.» The Iraqi judiciary, as stated in the same document, considered Al-Ta'i's statements to be «beyond the scope of freedom of expression.»

On June 9, 2022, Saadoun Damad posted the following tweet on his Twitter account: «In the end, it is necessary to express gratitude, respect, and appreciation to everyone who supported me and my program and did not leave me alone to face all these threats, injustice, and arbitrariness.»

7. On June 16, 2022, the Speaker of the Iraqi Council of Representatives, Mohammed Al-Halbousi, filed a lawsuit against Al-Tagheer channel and program host

Najm Al-Rubaie due to their hosting of politician Misha'an Al-Jubouri, who criticized and attacked the Speaker of the Council of Representatives during his appearance on the channel (39).

8. On July 30, 2022, three journalists from Al-Mayadeen media network were injured while covering protests in the Green Zone in Baghdad by supporters of the Sadr movement, according to news reports and journalists who spoke to the Committee of Journalists Protection.

The security forces deployed stun grenades that hit Al-Mayadeen photographer Zaid Khalid Jumaa, Abdullah Saad, the correspondent, and Abdullah Badran, the Baghdad bureau chief (40).

Restrictions on press freedom and violations targeting journalists are numerous and not limited to government entities alone. The government fails to provide sufficient protection for them against any attacks. On July 29, 2022, protesters affiliated with the Sadr movement closed the office of Alforat TV channel in the city of Basra, owned by Ammar al-Hakim, the leader of the Hikma movement, in response to a speech he delivered on the same day criticizing the Sadr movement's protests (41).

9. On July 30, 2022, Ali Aldhabbhawi, the host of the program «Studio Al-Tasi'a» on Al-Baghdadia TV, was assaulted in a public street in front of his children in the holy city of Najaf by the personal secretary of Adnan al-Zurfi, the former governor of Najaf and an officer in the Popular Mobilization Forces. This was reported by the channel on its website (42).

Al-Dhabbhawi mentioned that «Ahmed Mahmoud Ibrahim, the personal secretary of former Governor Adnan al-Zurfi, accompanied by an officer in the Popular Mobilization Forces named Alaa Al-Mousawi, assaulted him by physically attacking him using their personal weapons. He confirmed that the assault took place in front of his children.»

10. On July 23, 2022, there was an attack on the house of Iraqi journalist Dr. Qusay Shafeeq, a presenter on the Watan satellite channel. Shafeeq posted a video on his Facebook account showing the damage caused to his house as a result of live gunfire and hand grenades, which led to injuries to his mother and son. He added that the attack happened because he exposed corruption issues related to the Border Customs Authority (43).

On March 15, 2022, he was arrested due to his opinions on the government's financial policies and his sharp criticism of them. He was detained at the Al-Azamiyah police station. On April 21, 2022, he was released. It is worth mentioning that the arrest was carried out by a civilian force without the knowledge or coordination with the local authorities in his residential area (44).



Shafeeq uses his Facebook page to express his opinions and comment on daily affairs that concern citizens.

11. On August 1, 2022, a supporter of the Coordinating Committee prevented a team from the official Iraqi channel, consisting of journalists Ahmed Aram and Ahmed Majid, from covering the event, citing the channel's affiliation with the authorities, according to the protester's statement (45).

12. On August 29, 2022, the staff of Al Jazeera channel, who were covering the events in the Green Zone that witnessed protests and armed confrontations between the Saraya al-Salam forces affiliated with the leader of the Sadr movement, Muqtada al-Sadr, and forces from the Popular Mobilization Forces aligned with the state and other factions affiliated with political forces, were arrested. Simultaneously, the staff of Al-Rasheed satellite channel was also arrested (46).

13. On September 11, 2022, a video circulated on social media showing the prevention of the crew of «Hona Baghdad» channel by riot police forces while they were covering the protests at the entrance of the Green Zone during a live broadcast (47).

14. On October 4, 2022, supporters of the Sadr movement stormed the building of Al-Rasheed Channel in Baghdad to protest remarks made by one of the program presenters regarding the «Mahdi Army,» an armed faction led by the Sadr movement leader Muqtada al-Sadr. The intrusion occurred despite tight security measures in place at the channel. Furniture and equipment belonging to the channel were vandalized during the incident (48).

15. On February 18, 2023, the headquarters of UTV channel, owned by businessman and politician Khamees Al-Khanjar, was targeted with a hand grenade in Al-Nidhal Street in the capital city of Baghdad. The channel primarily operates from Istanbul, the capital of Turkey.

The channel condemned the targeting incident and affirmed that it «adopts a moderate discourse in its coverage.» UTV channel called on the security forces to provide protection for its headquarters in Baghdad and investigate the incident.

16. Previously, on February 17, 2022, the channel faced new threats after being accused by supporters of the Popular Mobilization Forces of «insulting the Hashd leader Abdulaziz al-Muhammadawi, also known as Abu Fadak.»

This is not the first time UTV channel has been targeted. On September 4, 2020, the channel received threats of arson after being accused of targeting the Shiite religious authority. Additionally, on October 28, 2021, the channel faced threats when an armed group delivered a Molotov cocktail and issued threats of burning

the channel down (49).

17. In an interview with the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights, journalist Dhul-Fiqar Al-Khafaji, who works for Al-Ahd TV channel in Babil Governorate, stated, «I was subjected to an assassination attempt on September 5, 2022. An armed group opened fire at me when I arrived at my house. The shooting took place at a distance of approximately 50 meters, but I managed to escape. I had received a series of threats prior to this attempt. I filed a lawsuit, but unfortunately, until this moment, no action has been taken. They asked me to provide names of those who attempted to assassinate me, which is difficult for me to ascertain.»

18. On September 21, 2022, surveillance cameras captured an individual attempting to place an explosive device at the door of the residence of journalist Nabil Al-Jabouri, the editor-in-chief of Akkad Agency and a correspondent for Zaqros Channel. This incident occurred following a series of attacks against Al-Jabouri, according to the head of the Iraqi Journalists Syndicate in Diwaniyah branch (50).

19. On February 19, 2023, a legal lawsuit was filed against TV presenter Adnan Al-Taie from UTV channel, accusing him of «inciting sectarianism.» This came after he discussed the religious chanter Bassem Al-Karbala'i during an episode of his program, which was aired on February 13, 2023, and questioned, «Are some of his religious chants not provocative of sectarianism, and shouldn't he be held accountable by the law?» (51)

Adnan Al-Taie stated in an interview with the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights, «I have received numerous threats that no one can imagine. If they had the chance, they would have killed me instantly.»

During the complaint filed by one of the lawyers against Adnan Al-Taie, he accused him of «his inquiry being the cause of the terrorist attack that occurred in Tarmiya district, north of Baghdad, on February 16, 2023.»



Impunity

The procedures of the Iraqi authorities enable perpetrators to evade punishment, as there are still numerous unresolved cases and lawsuits against accused individuals. The prevailing impunity has led to an increase in crimes committed against defenders, and the authorities face political pressures that contribute to the perpetrators evading accountability.

1. On February 2, 2022, on the second anniversary of the assassination of writer and novelist Alaa Mashzoub by armed individuals in Karbala province, intellectuals in Karbala held a session to commemorate his legacy and called for holding his killers accountable. However, the authorities have been unable to apprehend the perpetrators, despite the crime taking place in the city center, which is under full security control by the security forces.

2. On February 11, 2022, following pressure from human rights defenders in Iraq, the Ministry of Interior arrested Major Omar Nazar, a member of the Rapid Response Brigade, on charges of killing protesters. The Ministry of Interior stated in a press release that «clarifying the facts is one of the top priorities of the Ministry of Interior in various cases. After extensive discussions and circulating rumors regarding the circumstances surrounding Major Omar Nazar, affiliated with the Rapid Response Brigade, we would like to clarify that this officer is currently in detention.»

The statement further added, «A legal committee has been formed within the Ministry of Interior to investigate all accusations against him. If it is proven that this officer has been negligent in performing his duties and has failed to adhere to them, legal actions will be taken against him, and the committee will work towards informing the public of all the facts» (62).

3. On May 7, 2023, the Iraqi Rusafa Criminal Court issued a verdict against criminal Ahmed Hamdawi Awad, who was accused of killing security expert Hisham al-Hashimi. Al-Hashimi was assassinated in front of his house in July 2020. The verdict was issued after several delays and suspicions of the suspect being smuggled to an unknown destination by influential entities.

The campaign «Protect Human Rights Defenders in Iraq Now!»(52) closely monitored the case and stated in its statement that the lack of transparency and failure to disclose information has raised concerns among many. These concerns stem from

doubts about achieving justice and holding the perpetrators accountable. The convicted suspect, who received the verdict, had no prior connection to Mr. Hisham al-Hashimi. This raises the question of what motivated him to commit this crime.

Indeed, the fact that the convicted suspect is affiliated with the Ministry of Interior and holds the rank of an officer raises questions about his motive for committing the crime. As a person familiar with the law and well aware of the consequences, it is puzzling why he would engage in such actions. Furthermore, the involvement of any entity or individuals supporting and protecting him raises additional concerns. These questions and inquiries require answers from the relevant authorities.

Without a doubt, we support every step towards achieving justice. However, impunity remains a prominent feature of the human rights situation in Iraq, with hundreds of pending cases and lawsuits against suspects that have not been resolved. The case of Al-Hashimi is not an isolated one. We are unaware of the progress of the investigations into the Sinkak massacre and Al-Zaytoun bridge, even years after they occurred.

Furthermore, the killers of Ihab Al-Wazni, Amjad Al-Dahamat, and others are still at large, evading prosecution. Instead of holding the perpetrators accountable, the families of the victims are left vulnerable to danger. We do not need empty promises that lead to procrastination, evasion, and ambiguity in legal procedures. It has been two years since the assassination of Al-Wazni, and despite the suspect's arrest shortly after the crime, the judiciary decided to release him due to a lack of evidence. As of the writing of this report, the killer remains free.

Immediate measures must be taken to hold the criminals accountable, as well as the entities behind them and those who collaborate with them, especially within the security apparatus. Unfortunately, some individuals within these institutions have been involved in acts of murder and assassination. It is crucial to cleanse the security agencies of such abusive elements as a necessary step in the process of holding the killers accountable and ensuring justice. This represents an important opportunity for the current government and judicial institutions to actively pursue cases of crimes and lawsuits against individuals responsible for acts of murder, assassination, and enforced disappearances.

4. On June 25, 2023, the Dhi Qar Criminal Court sentenced criminal Omar Nazar Fakhraldeen, a major officer in the Rapid Response Forces, to life imprisonment in relation to the Zaytoun Bridge massacre in Nasiriyah. The Zaytoun massacre refers to a series of systematic killings that targeted Iraqi protesters in the city of Nasiriyah, the capital of Dhi Qar Governorate, between November 28 and November 30, 2019. These acts of violence occurred just one day after the incident of burning the Iranian Consulate in Najaf on November 27.

According to the organization «End Impunity,» criminal Omar Nazar was involved in human rights violations during the liberation war against the ISIS organization. This was documented by journalist Ali Arkadi, who accompanied the Rapid Response Forces during the liberation operations. However, he was not held accountable at that time and later went on to commit crimes during the outbreak of the October



Uprising. He participated in suppressing protesters in Nasiriyah and was involved in the Zaytoun Bridge massacre, which resulted in the deaths of over 70 protesters, according to the organization's report.

Misusing the Judiciary to Target Defenders

We have previously highlighted the variations in the types and nature of violations against human rights defenders. These violations have now taken the form of legal actions through the issuance of judicial orders and judgments targeting defenders. This represents a new tactic employed by the authorities and influential parties to suppress and curtail freedom of expression in Iraq. In recent months, numerous lawsuits have been filed against human rights defenders, which activists have described as intimidating. These lawsuits aim to restrict freedom of expression and impede participation in protests, seminars, and television programs that criticize the widespread corruption in the country.

1. On January 27, 2022, the Directorate of Intelligence and Counterterrorism in Muthanna issued a notification against human rights defender Faisal Salman Ghraib Al-Baraki, which he shared on his Facebook page(53). On July 12, the same authority issued another notification against Al-Baraki, which he also shared on Facebook. In his post, he wrote, «For the fourth time, we are being summoned on the same malicious accusation following the protests of October 25, 2019.»

#I, along with more than ten fellow protesters from the city of Samawah, are scheduled to appear before the Muthanna Criminal Court on the upcoming Tuesday, the 26th of this month, in accordance with Article 342 of the Iraqi Penal Code. This article stipulates a range of penalties, including imprisonment for 15 years to life or even death.

#WeRelyOnTheJusticeOfTheMuthannaJudiciary

Al-Baraki added, «The reason behind filing this malicious lawsuit is in response to my complaint against officers and members of the Muthanna Intelligence Directorate, after they tortured me and my fellow protesters in the cells of Muthanna Intelligence in 2019. This complaint is solely against the free and heroic protesters of Muthanna and Iraq, with the support of Allah Almighty»(54).

Al-Baraki utilizes his Facebook page to identify shortcomings in the projects implemented in Muthanna province and to express his support for the protest movement and solidarity with fellow protesters.

2. On March 11, 2022, the Wasit Criminal Court issued a clarification regarding the circumstances surrounding the death sentence imposed on four protesters. They were convicted of «conspiring and participating in the attack on the Al-

Azeeziyah power distribution station and throwing a hand grenade at the station's security personnel,» as stated in the statement(55).

The four protesters mentioned are Kazem Hadi Kazem, Mohammed Atiya Hussein, Abbas Ali Aziz, and Hussein Saddam Hashem. There have been reports circulating among activists indicating that the accused protesters were subjected to torture and coerced into confessing to the killing of the officer.

3. On March 23, 2022, the Tikrit Misdemeanor Court issued its verdict against civil society activist Yazid Hassoun Afat (Yazid Al-Hassoun), sentencing him to three months in prison in a defamation case filed against him by the Salahuddin Governor, Amar Al-Jabouri. However, he was released weeks later after the governor dropped the lawsuit. The court's decision stated, «The convicted Yazid Hassoun Afat Dalian Al-Shammari is sentenced to three months of simple imprisonment, based on the provisions of Article 433 of Penal Code No. 111 of 1969 as amended, for the crime of defaming the complainant Amar Jabr Khalil through NRT channel»(56).

After his release, Al-Hassoun wrote the following on his Facebook account: «Thank you to everyone who stood by me with their words, actions, and support. To those who advocate for freedom and believe in it, you have been the best support in a situation I wouldn't wish upon you. With my unwavering belief in freedom and the power of speech, on the path we have taken to hold corruption accountable, even if it's through words.»

On his Facebook page, which he uses to support the popular movement and oppose corruption, he prominently displays the following statement: «Rebellious against those who wronged me and made me search for my homeland among nations.»

4. On March 28, 2022, activist Dr. Ahmed Yahya Issa, a professor of chemistry at the College of Science in the University of Basra, was arrested following a notification issued by the Anti-Crime Department of Al-Ma'qil, based on a lawsuit filed against him by the police chief of Basra province. The lawsuit was filed due to his criticism of the poor security situation in the province and the officers' failure to fulfill their assigned duties. He was detained at Al-Ma'qil Police Station (57).

This arrest followed Issa's statement that there are criminals against whom arrest warrants have been issued, and they frequently visit the police chief's office.

On April 6, 2022, a group of civil society activists organized a peaceful gathering in front of the Federal Appeals Court in Basra Governorate, demanding the release of Issa and an end to the policy of silencing voices and respect for freedom of expression. He was released the following day (58).

It is worth mentioning that Dr. Ahmed Issa had previously been subjected to a brutal assault by unknown assailants in the middle of Basra in September 2021. As a result of the attack, he was taken to the hospital for treatment.

5. On April 26, 2022, the Samawah Misdemeanor Court issued its verdict against defender Faiz Waham al-A'jiby, sentencing him to four months in prison with execution. The verdict is related to a defamation case filed against him by the Salman District Administrator. It is worth noting that al-A'jiby had published information about the electrical cables that were stolen nearly two years ago in the Salman District. He accused the local government of having knowledge of the



culprits behind the theft but not disclosing it, and claimed that the theft was carried out by a specific individual (59).

The sentence was issued after his arrest on July 4, 2021, along with a group of protesters. He was released the following day.

6. On December 5, 2022, the Rusafa Criminal Court issued its verdict against civil society activist Haider Hameed Fijan Al-Zaidi, sentencing him to three years of rigorous imprisonment under Article 226 of the Iraqi Penal Code, which pertains to insulting state institutions. The court's verdict also included the provision that «the affected party, which is the Popular Mobilization Forces, retains the right to claim compensation,» and the «confiscation of his mobile phone.» The verdict is subject to appeal.

In a video that circulated on social media, Al-Zaidi clarified that he was arrested on June 6, 2022, and released on bail on June 19 of the same month. He was arrested due to tweets posted on his Twitter account, which were later deleted. The Popular Mobilization Forces filed a legal complaint against him, alleging that these tweets were defamatory(60). His fellow protesters launched a widespread campaign demanding his release, using the hashtag #FreeHaiderAlZaidi.

On December 19, 2022, the Director General of the Public Relations Department of the Popular Mobilization Forces, Muhand Al-Aqabi, announced that the organization had dropped the charges against Al-Zaidi(61) .

7. On June 2, 2023, civil activist Yasin bin Majid was arrested following a lawsuit filed against him. There is no confirmed information regarding the plaintiff or the entity that filed the lawsuit against him. Reports suggest that the politician Ryan Al-Kaldani has filed a lawsuit against him, according to statements made by journalist Qahtan Adnan on his program «Bimokhtalif Al-Ara» on I News channel. The case was monitored by the Human Rights Observatory, and a social media campaign emerged from his fellow activists demanding his release. On June 10, he was released on bail, and he announced the news of his release through a video posted on his Facebook account.

Yasin bin Majid, the free activist, utilizes social media platforms to criticize government performance, inadequate healthcare services, and political figures. He has participated in various interviews on satellite channels. He is also one of the protesters who took part in the protest movement in October 2019.

Demeaning Content.. A Weapon in Whose Hands?!

on January 2023, the Ministry of Interior announced the establishment of an online platform for reporting content that violates public decency. On February 8, 2023, Faiq Zidan, the Chief of the Supreme Judicial Council, issued an official letter emphasizing the importance of taking strict legal measures against individuals disseminating such content. Consequently, the Ministry of Interior initiated a campaign of arrests, as stated by Saad Ma'an, Head of the Security Media Cell and Director of the Relations and Media Department at the Ministry of Interior, during an interview on Al-Rasheed Satellite Channel.

Ma'an confirmed that his ministry had detained eight individuals at that time, and soon after, the Iraqi judiciary began issuing verdicts against the owners of this objectionable content. Subsequently, the judiciary issued judgments ranging from three months to one year. The most recent ruling, on June 20, 2023, by the Amara Misdemeanor Court, sentenced (Aboud Skibah) to one year of suspended imprisonment on charges of disseminating demeaning content.

These judgments are based on legal texts that contain numerous vague and ambiguous phrases and concepts, lacking precise definitions. This approach to the law raises concerns about the potential for using such texts to restrict freedoms and silence dissenting voices and critics of the government. It reflects methods employed by authoritarian states and regimes.

The Supreme Judicial Council's communication explicitly indicates that this campaign will also target individuals who criticize or incite against state institutions and their agencies. This could encompass campaigns advocating for and fighting against corruption. Furthermore, there is a possibility that our own report could be interpreted as incitement against the state and its agencies.

The danger lies in the authority's interference to impose its own standards in determining what qualifies as acceptable or objectionable content. This practice can transform into a policy where those in power impose their ideologies, preferences, and perceptions on the entire population through the judicial and executive systems.

We are unaware of the criteria upon which the Content Monitoring Committee relies. Questions arise regarding the reporting of content on social media platforms through the Ministry of Interior's platform. Many public figures, politicians, and officials express opinions that receive significant opposition in Iraqi society, and it is possible for thousands of individuals to report such content. Will content creators who undermine the dignity of citizens or contribute to igniting identity-based conflicts, such as sectarian or ethnic tensions, be held accountable? Moreover, the platform itself operates based on the beliefs of a specific audience regarding what constitutes an offense, without considering the country's cultural diversity, sub-identities, and regional traditions.



Recommendations

1. The legislative authority holds the responsibility of ensuring the alignment of domestic laws with the international agreements it has ratified, such as the Declaration on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders.
2. The authorities are obligated to uphold their constitutional commitments by safeguarding public freedoms, including the freedom of peaceful assembly, freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and combating deeply entrenched corruption.
3. It is the duty of the Iraqi government to provide the necessary protection to human rights defenders who face persistent violations and attacks by armed groups.
4. The Iraqi government bears full responsibility for safeguarding the well-being of all protesters, journalists, human rights defenders, and members of civil society.
5. The relevant Iraqi authorities must identify all perpetrators involved in crimes such as abduction, torture, and the killing of human rights defenders, peaceful protesters, and other activists, and expeditiously bring those responsible to justice.
6. The investigative body concerned should promptly disclose the findings of its inquiry into the killing of protesters and actively pursue the prosecution of the perpetrators.
7. Government institutions and Iraqi officials should distinguish between legitimate criticism of state institutions, which is a guaranteed right, and actions that cause harm or undermine them.
8. The Iraqi authorities should ensure the protection of both Iraqi and foreign journalists operating in the country, taking measures to prevent Iraq from becoming an unsafe environment for journalistic work. State institutions should actively uphold press freedom, recognizing it as a fundamental pillar of any democratic system.
9. All Iraqi political figures and powers must refrain from intimidating civil society activists and journalists through the misuse of legal proceedings.

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No.	Source
1.	Sara Sanber: After twenty years, Iraq continues to bear the consequences of the American invasion.
2.	Al-Iraqiya News Agency - Health: The number of injuries in the protests has risen to 125, including 25 military personnel.
3.	Al-Sadr ends his supporters' sit-in in the Green Zone: The decision of isolation is final.
4.	Amnesty International: An Open Letter to the Prime Minister of Iraq, Mustafa Al-Kadhimi.
5.	Ali Kareem Adhheeb: Despite the wealth of the region in oil and gas resources, why is the living situation deteriorating in Iraqi Kurdistan?
6.	The annual report of the Hammurabi Organization for Human Rights in Iraq during the year 2022
7.	Amnesty International's report on the state of human rights worldwide for the year 2022-2023.
8.	The annual report issued by Human Rights Watch on the state of human rights worldwide for the year 2022.
9.	Tweet by Deputy Sajjad Salem regarding the suppression of protesters in Wasit.
10.	Gulf Center: The 22nd periodic report.
11.	Al-Iraqiya News Agency: Babil Police opens an investigation into the assault on 6 protesters and arrests one of the suspects.
12.	Gulf Center for Human Rights - 23rd Periodic Report
13.	Gulf Center for Human Rights - 23rd Periodic Report
14.	Post on Facebook - MBC Al-Samawa Page.
15.	Al-Awla News: "We will organize a large demonstration on Friday... October protestors enter the Green Zone and request assurances from Al-Sadr!"
16.	Gulf Center for Human Rights - 24th Periodic Report.
17.	Annual Report of Hammurabi Organization for Human Rights in Iraq during the year 2022.
18.	Al-Rasheed Satellite Channel website: Complete closure of the main entrances of Baghdad and 70% of the roads are out of service.
19.	Al-Hurra: Iraq... Protests in Baghdad on the third anniversary of the "October Revolution."
20.	A confidential source informed the Hoqoq Observatory for defenders' protection about the situation.
21.	Al-Mada: Committees flock to Nasiriyah to investigate casualties among protesters.

22.	Tweet from the official spokesperson on behalf of the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, Yahya Rasul, regarding the targeting of protesters in Nasiriyah.
23.	Gulf Center for Human Rights: 26th Periodic Report
24.	Hoqoq Observatory for defenders' protection
25.	NRT: Basra Police Clarifies Details of Activist Haider Sabri's Murder... Who is the Accused?
26.	Campaign Statement: Sinjar Can't Take Anymore
27.	Shafaq News: Activist Escapes Assassination Attempt in Southern Thi Qar
28.	Middle East Newspaper: Mysterious Assassination of University Professor in Nasiriyah, Southern Iraq (Video)
29.	Dijlah News Agency: Unknown individuals assault activist Haider Al-Salehi in the center of Nasiriyah.
30.	A video posted on Facebook documenting the moment of the attack on activist Abu Ayyah Al-Sa'idi.
31.	A video posted on Facebook: Activist Ammar Al-Hilfi: The arrest of activist Ahmed Mahlhal has been...
32.	A post on Facebook: "The people of Basra should say..."
33.	Al-Rasheed Satellite Channel website: Arrest of two representatives of the contracts, and the security committee issues 6 recommendations regarding their protests.
34.	Urgent Appeal on Human Rights Defenders in Iraq
35.	Al-Hurra: Iraqi Activist Survives Assassination Attempt by an IED and Gunfire
36.	Nas News: Hadi Al-Amiri sues TV presenter Mustafa Al-Rubaie, and the latter will appear before the court tomorrow.
37.	Sawt Al-Iraq: Detention of the TV presenter at "Al-Baghdadia" channel.
38.	Ultra Iraq: Playing with fire.... A new incitement campaign targeting the neutral.
39.	A report issued by the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day 2022.
40.	Al-Mayadeen: After the injury of the Al-Mayadeen team in Iraq, organizations demand the protection of journalists.
41.	Shafaq News: Supporters of the Sadr Movement close the offices of Ammar al-Hakim and Al-Furat channel in Basra (video).
42.	Al-Baghdadia: To silence the voice of truth... Activist Al-Dhubhawi was subjected to an attack by the personal secretary of Al-Zarfi and an officer in the Popular Mobilization Forces (video).
43.	A video posted on Facebook documenting the attack on the residence of journalist Dr. Qusay Shafiq.

44.	Arrest of a "journalist" following a judicial summons by the Minister of Finance.
45.	Reporters Without Borders: Journalists suffer from attacks while covering popular protests.
46.	A report issued by the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day 2022.
47.	Facebook Live: Moment of Huna Baghdad channel crew being prevented from filming by riot police forces.
48.	Kurdistan24 Agency: Supporters of Sadr storm Al-Rabea TV channel, and Al-Kadhimi intervenes and threatens the perpetrators.
49.	A report issued by the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day 2022.
50.	Akad News Agency: The Iraqi Journalists Syndicate branch in Diwaniyah condemns the ongoing threats against the Editor-in-Chief of Akad News Agency, Nabil Al-Jabouri.
51.	Shafaq News: Document... Lawsuit filed against journalist Adnan Al-Ta'i on charges of inciting "sectarianism and creating discord."
52.	Campaign Statement: Mysterious Ruling and Unknown Motives.
53.	A picture of a notification letter posted on Faisal Salman Al-Burki's page.
54.	A picture of a notification letter posted on Faisal Salman Al-Burki's page.
55.	Clarification: A statement issued by the Supreme Judicial Council.
56.	Nas News: Judicial decision to imprison activist Yazid Al-Hassoun for three months.
57.	Al-Hareer News Agency: Basra Police Chief files a lawsuit against a civil activist.
58.	Activists organize a sit-in in front of the Court of Appeals in support of Dr. Ahmed Issa.
59.	Gulf Center: The 22nd periodic report.
60.	A video on Facebook shows the defender Haider Al-Zaidi speaking about the circumstances of his arrest and his subsequent release on bail.
61.	Rudaw: The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) decide to drop the lawsuit filed against activist Haider Al-Zaidi.
62.	A report issued by the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day 2022.