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Iraq: Concerns about the suspension of TV channels' licences

Amnesty International has written to the Iraqi Communications and Media Council (CMC) to seek clarification about its decision to suspend the licences of 10 satellite TV channels to operate in Iraq. The banned TV channels include Al-Jazeera and Al-Sharqiya. The CMC's decision follows a surge of violent clashes and bombing attacks with hundreds of people being killed or injured over the past week, including civilians, security forces, armed individuals or members of armed groups. These incidents have been widely covered by Iraqi and international media and reporting by TV channels has included speeches of people calling for resorting to violence.

In a statement of 28 April 2013 the CMC stated that the broadcasts of the banned TV channels constituted "incitement", calls for "for disorder and launching retaliatory criminal attacks against security forces", and "explicit promotion for constitutionally and legally banned terrorist organizations." The CMC further stated that its decision followed "repeated violations and escalation in the sectarian tone" of the concerned TV channels. The CMC is the body charged with regulating broadcasting and communications networks and services, including licensing, in Iraq.

The media play a key role in ensuring the right of everyone to freedom of expression, which includes the right to seek and receive, as well as impart, information and ideas. While international law permits some restrictions on the exercise of the right to freedom of expression for certain purposes, it also requires authorities to demonstrate the precise nature of the threat which any such measure seeks to address, and that the measure is necessary and proportionate – that is, the least intrusive means of achieving the intended purpose – and complies with the principle of non-discrimination. Moreover, such restrictions must not undermine the right of freedom of expression itself.

Restrictions which are unnecessary or disproportionate, or not for a legitimate reason, violate the right to freedom of expression. Amnesty International calls on the Iraqi authorities to reconsider the decision to suspend the TV channels and to demonstrate that any restrictions on the operation of the media comply with Iraq's obligations under international law.

BACKGROUND

The escalation of violence in Iraq over the past week followed the raid of a sit-in of hundreds of protesters at a central square in the city of al-Hawija by Iraqi security forces on 23 April 2013, leading to violent clashes and shootings that caused scores of people being killed or injured. Dozens of people were reportedly killed by Iraqi security forces and according to official sources three soldiers were killed (see also Amnesty International, "Iraq: Rein in security forces following the killings of dozens at protest in al-Hawija" (Index: 14/006/2013), 25 April 2013).

Anti-government demonstrations have been ongoing since December 2012 in pre-dominantly Sunni areas of Iraq. Protesters accuse the Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki of leading a government that discriminates against Sunnis. They have also demanded greater respect for due process, the enactment of an amnesty law and a review of the country's anti-terrorism law. Many of the protests have been peaceful but some have resulted in clashes between security forces and protestors, resulting in fatalities.