

# Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/iraq-threat-to-close-47-radio-and-tv-28-06-2012,42909.html>

Middle East/North Africa - Iraq

Media / government tension

## Threat to close 47 radio and TV stations, protests against repressive law

28 June 2012

[Read in Arabic / بالعربية](#)

Tension between authorities and media have peaked this month with a decision by the Communications and Media Commission (CMC) – still pending implementation – to close 47 radio and TV stations on the grounds they lack official permits, and with demonstrations by journalists calling for the repeal of the Law on Journalists' Rights, which parliament adopted in August 2011 and which is widely regarded as violating the rights it claims to defend.

### Disturbing decision by panel of questionable independence

Reporters Without Borders is alarmed by the CMC's decision, which triggered such an outcry that the interior ministry has given the radio and TV stations concerned 45 days from 25 June to comply with regulations.

The CMC took its decision more than a month ago but it was only revealed [on 23 June](#) by the Journalism Freedoms Observatory (JFO), which obtained [documentary evidence](#) of the plan. It concerns both local and foreign TV stations such as the *BBC*, *Voice of America*, *Radio Monte Carlo*, *Radio Sawa*, *Al-Baghdadia TV* and *Al-Sharqiya News*.

Many journalists and some politicians have criticized the decision as an attempt to gag the media, pointing out that the head of the CMC is appointed by Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki and that many of the targeted media are noted either for the non-partisan nature of their Iraqi coverage or, in some cases such as *Al-Baghdadia* and *Al-Sharqiya*, for their frequent criticism of the Iraqi government.

Iraq is currently experiencing a major political crisis with the prime minister facing mounting opposition. He is often accused of authoritarianism, nepotism and corruption.

Despite the political crisis, the CMC insists that its decision is not politically motivated and is aimed solely at getting the targeted radio and TV stations to pay their licence dues. The CMC has also pointed out that it published an announcement in all the newspapers last February inviting media without a licence to apply for one within two months.

"But only a small number applied, and 39 media outlets preferred not to come and not to apply the law," CMC board member Salem Mashkur told *Agence France-Presse*.

The *BBC* and *Voice of America* say their employees are not currently encountering any problems with the authorities, and that they are in the process of working with the CMC to renew their licences. *Radio Sawa*, an Arabic-language station funded by the United States, said it was very surprised to learn that it was on the CMC list and insists that it already has a valid licence.

According to Reuters, some of the listed media have no bureau in Iraq and therefore would not need an Iraqi licence. One of the radio stations, *Sawt Al-Iraq*, is listed twice, once as not having a licence and once as having had its licence suspended by the CMC.

Reporters Without Borders urges the CMC to ensure that the fees required for licences are reasonable. According to the online newspaper *Elaph*, the fees demanded last year by the CMC ranged from 180,000 to 1.5 million dollars (145,000 to 1.1 million euros). The exorbitant size of the fees could explain why some media are not paying, especially as they already have to assign a significant part of their budget to protecting their employees and installations because of the frequency of violence against the media.

The CMC was founded in 2004 by the US-led coalition authorities. Meant to be a fully independent, non-profit regulatory body, it has often been criticized for its lack of independence since the coalition handed over to an Iraqi government. It has also been criticized for demanding exorbitant fees from some media and for decisions that pose a serious threat to media freedom.

## **Protests against the Law on Journalists' Rights**

Reporters Without Borders voices its support for Iraqi journalists in their determination to get the Law on Journalists' Rights repealed and to voice their discontent with a government that seems increasingly bent on stifling freedom of information.

Originally called the Law on the Protection of Journalists and adopted by parliament on 9 August 2011, the Law on Journalists' rights in fact represents a major step backwards for the rights of media workers.

The campaign for its repeal is being led by the Iraqi [Journalists' Rights Defence Association](#). More than 700 journalists signed an appeal to supreme court president Madhat Al-Mahmud (registered as petition No. 34 on 26 April, according to [uragency.net](#)) to overturn the law on the grounds that it violates articles 13, 14, 38 and 46 of the constitution and international conventions ratified by Iraq, including article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Reporters Without Borders commented in September 2011 that the new law "does nothing to improve the current situation for the media and even represents an additional danger for media freedom and freedom of information."

Its detractors are describing it as a major setback to the media freedom and freedom of information achieved after Saddam Hussein's removal in 2003. Many people have been staging street demonstrations to protest against the law and the Maliki government's policy. The most recent protest was in Baghdad on 20 June.

---