

Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/iraq-new-wave-of-abuses-and-29-10-2011,41313.html>

Middle East & North Africa - Iraq

State of siege

New wave of abuses and intimidation against journalists

29 October 2011

Reporters Without Borders strongly condemns the persecution by the Iraqi authorities of the radio station *Al-Sada*, the only independent broadcaster in the province of Al-Qadisiya,

Ahmed Al-Qasier, founder and manager of the station, recently told the press freedom organization that the station had come under severe pressure.

Three days ago, the provincial council decided to close the station, in the provincial capital Diwaniyya south of Baghdad, on the grounds that its programmes contained music which was "contrary to local morality", although the manager said they were composed of songs from the classical Arabic repertoire.

When *Al-Sada* was preparing to start broadcasting at the beginning of the year, the governor intervened to prevent the launch of the station.

After negotiations between the editorial team and the authorities, the station finally opened in May. However, the provincial council promptly asked it to pay a fee of 50,000,000 Iraqi dinars (28,700 euros), renewable annually, to continue broadcasting.

This "registration tax" was imposed as a result of intervention by the Telecommunications Committee, Al-Qasier said.

Al-Sada nevertheless continued to be the target of intimidation and pressure. This month, several of the station's contributors received anonymous threats on the mobile phones. Several members of the editorial staff, including programme director **Muntather Al-Kifaey**, decided to resign.

Yesterday, the local branch of the Iraqi journalists' union urged the authorities to revoke the station's closure, a decision which it said violated freedom of the press as guaranteed by the constitution. Its representative stressed that such a move was unprecedented in Iraqi justice and warned of the dangers that it might present for the media industry.

Reporters Without Borders urges the authorities in Diwaniyya to put a halt to the persecution of *Al-Sada* staff. The organization recalls that freedom of the press is guaranteed by the Iraqi constitution and has been reaffirmed in the law on protection of journalists approved by parliament in August.

It also asks the governor to reconsider his decision and allow the radio station to continue broadcasting and guarantee the safety of its staff.

Also, the freelance American journalist **Daniel Smith** was arrested at noon on 21 October after the weekly demonstration held in Baghdad's Tahrir Square. He was released in the early hours of 26 October.

Smith was held incommunicado and was not allowed to contact colleagues, relatives or the U.S. diplomatic mission in Baghdad, nor was anybody alerted of his arrest by the Iraqi government.

On the day of his arrest, he was taken to the army's Muthanna Airport detention centre near the airport where he was questioned several times, in particular about his persistent presence

at the demonstrations.

On October 25, he was taken to a detention cell in an interior ministry building after an order to deport him was made, before being released some hours later, after the intervention of the prime minister.

Smith has worked in Iraq since 2003. He has worked with the think-tank International Crisis Group since 2009 and other organizations, and contributes occasionally to the Iraq press freedom organization Journalistic Freedoms Observatory.
