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Middle East & North Africa - Iraq

Disturbing climate

Physical attacks and arrests make it impossible for journalists to work in Iraqi Kurdistan

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Reporters Without Borders condemns the many cases of journalists being physically attacked or arrested while covering demonstrations in Kalar, Sulaymaniyah and Erbil in the past few days. In some instances, live rounds have been used to fire indiscriminately on protesters and journalists. This is unacceptable.

The press freedom organization is also concerned that the security forces are systematically hunting down journalists and, in some cases, bringing them to trial and convicting them. We urge the region's authorities to guarantee the safety of journalists and their right to work freely.

Many journalists covering yesterday's demonstration in Erbil were attacked by the security forces and some were arrested. **Jiyar Omer** of the newspaper *Hawlati* and **Shiwan Sidi** of *Civil Magazine* were beaten by plain-clothes policemen and Sidi's hand was broken. Both had to be hospitalized. **Awara Hamid** of the newspaper *Rozhnama* and the news website *Sbeyi*, **Bahman Omer** of *Civil Magazine*, *Kurdistan News Network* bureau chief **Hajar Anwar**, *KNN* reporter **Mariwan Mala Hassan** and two cameramen were attacked by police and then taken to a police station where they were held handcuffed for two hours.

Hiwa Omer of *Azadi* also reported being attacked by members of the security forces in Erbil. *Associated Press* correspondent **Yahiya Barzanji** and *Awene* reporter **Sirwan Kharib** suffered tear-gas inhalation. *Samal Post* editor **Rasul Hussein** told Reporters Without Borders he was kidnapped during the protest by unidentified men who took him to Qushtapa, a village 10 km southeast of Erbil, and released him there.

Hawlati reporter **Shnur Muhammad** was hit in the hand by a shot fired by members of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan security forces on 17 April in Sulaymaniyah. He was taken to a hospital where doctors operated on his injury. The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) is one of the two main parties that control Kurdistan. The other is the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).

A Sulaymaniyah civil court convicted philosopher and journalist **Farouq Rafiq** of defamation on 17 April, sentencing him to a fine of 200 Iraqi dinars or a month in prison. His wife, the sociologist and journalist **Nask Qadr**, is also being prosecuted on a defamation charge.

Media freedom activists are also being systematically hounded. *Lvin Magazine* owner and editor **Ahmed Mira**, who often speaks out in defence of media freedom, was attacked by members of the Asayesh (intelligence services) and PUK security forces while taking part in an event in Kalar on 14 April to mark the anniversary of the 1988 Anfal massacre of Kurds by Saddam Hussein's forces.

Mira told Reporters Without Borders: "The Kurds have not been participating in events organized by the KDP or the PUK since 17 February. As a teacher at Kalal University, I decided to participate in the Anfal commemoration that the students spontaneously organized. Asayesh members came and asked me which one was Ahmed Mira. When I replied that it was me, they immediately began beating me. I was hit dozens of times. Fortunately the students came to my help."

As his home in Sulaymaniyah was surrounded by security forces, Mira was unable to return to it until Prime Minister Barham Salih interceded. He says he plans to bring charges against the security forces. Meanwhile, there have been many shows of support for him from students since the attack.
