

**Hundreds of journalists forced into exile in five years
since launch of US-led invasion of Iraq**

Fifth anniversary of start of war on 20 March 2003

Report by Angélique Ferrat and Hajar Smouni

This year began badly for Iraqi journalists. The president of their leading union was gunned down in late February. The circumstances were not at unusual in this violence-ridden country. **Shihab Al-Tamimi** was driving himself to a meeting when another car overtook his, shots were fired and he was hit four times. He died of his injuries four days later, on 27 February. The date has been chosen by the union for an annual commemoration of the deaths of journalists in Iraq.

And what of the lives of journalists in Iraq? We know they are targets for violence. They have been since Saddam Hussein's removal, but the situation deteriorated steadily, reaching its zenith in 2006 when hundreds of thousands of Iraqis fled the country to escape sectarian violence. Journalists have been targeted by Sunni and Shiite militias, by Al-Qaeda, by the authorities, including the police, and by the US-led coalition forces. Journalists also complain of the way they are treated by politicians' bodyguards.

A total of 210 journalists and media assistants have been killed since March 2003. The Iraqi interior ministry has initiated investigations into their deaths but only an insignificant number of these investigations have resulted in the arrests of those responsible. The overwhelming majority of these murders continue to be unpunished.

Journalists are also the targets of abduction by groups that are politically motivated or are just seeking ransom payments. Reporters Without Borders has recorded 87 abductions of journalists since the start of the war. Initially, it was foreign journalists who were most targeted. Nowadays the targets tend to their Iraqi colleagues.

The number of foreign journalists in Iraq

has declined considerably since 2003. Those that still go take great care not be caught in any ambush from which it would be extremely hard to extricate themselves, even if ransoms were paid. The fate of 15 kidnapping victims, one of them British, is not known. **Fred Nérac**, a French cameraman working for the British television news company *ITN*, is still missing. Caught in crossfire between US and Iraqi forces on the second day of the invasion, his body has never been found.

The Iraqi authorities obviously urge all parties to respect both life and press freedom, but the latest measures taken by the government show how powerless it is. At the end of February, the interior ministry proposed giving journalists permission to carry firearms. Another announcement that shocked the leading Iraqi journalists associations was a proposal by the governor of Najaf (160 km south of Baghdad) to create a special section for journalists in the world's largest Shiite cemetery.

Ibrahim Al Srage of the Iraqi Journalists Association says the situation has improved in recent months. But violations of the rights of journalists continue to be commonplace. The association had recorded 30 cases since the start of the year. They range from verbal threats to physical attacks, mostly by the bodyguards of certain politicians.

Iraqi journalists are like the rest of their compatriots. Many have gone into exile because they have been targeted, threatened and kidnapped, or because they are tired of a security situation that is a still fraught. Most of them have sought refuge in the Kurdish north, in the Jordanian capital of Amman or the Syrian capital of Damascus. Syria has 1.4 million Iraqi refugees. Jordan has half a million.

2006 was a turning point for the Iraqi media. It was the year that a significant number decided to move somewhere safer. The Iraqi Journalists Association says Iraqi Kurdistan offers much more safety. An estimated 200 Iraqi journalists and media personnel are in Jordan. Fifty are registered with the Jordanian Information Centre while the rest are in an irregular situation. It is hard to get any figures in Syria. Most of the journalists there have not been able to find work. A few lucky ones are managing to work as journalists without permission. Dozens of Iraqi journalists have also found refuge in Europe. Reporters Without Borders has helped around 30 of them, mainly in France.

Jordan is the preferred exile destination for

Iraqi journalists. It is still the place where they can best get by. Amman and its Queen Alia International Airport are the hub used by Iraqi politicians travelling to Washington or Europe. Several Iraqi media have installed their regional bureau in Jordan. Amman has become their operational base. Some broadcast media that have been banned in Iraq continue to broadcast from Amman.

Syria was nonetheless the main destination of journalists fleeing Iraq in 2007. This was just because Jordan virtually closed its borders to Iraqis at the end of 2006. But Damascus is a tougher place for refugee journalists. They have few job opportunities as the Iraqi media presence is much smaller in Syria.

Amman, operational base for Iraqi media

- *Baghdad TV*: 64 employees in Amman, 32 in Baghdad. The station set up operations in Jordan in 2007 after two employees were killed and 17 were wounded in Iraq.
- *Al-Iraqiya*: 10 employees in Amman. Aside from its offices in Baghdad, the Iraqi public TV station has regional bureaux in Beirut, Tehran, Abu Dhabi, Cairo, Washington and Amman.
- *Al-Sharkiya*: its Baghdad offices were closed in 2006. It moved to Amman where it employs about 20 people.
- *Al-Rafeedin* (satellite TV station)
- *Al-Sumariya* (satellite TV station)
- *Babel TV* (satellite TV station)
- *Al Dustour* (daily newspaper)
- *Al Zaman* (daily newspaper)
- *Al Sabaa* (daily newspaper)
- *Al Mashrek* (daily newspaper)

For this study, Reporters Without Borders met with Amman-based journalists and Jordanian media editors and executives, and interviewed the Jordanian Information Centre. It also talked by phone with journalists based in Damascus (at it did not get a visa to visit Syria). Most of the people interviewed are not identified by name at their request. Some feared that there could be reprisals when the report came out.

It quickly became clear that there are as many situations as there are journalists in exile. But overall trends and patterns emerged. Journalists who go to Jordan manage better financially than those who seek refuge in Syria. The authorities in both Amman and Damascus allow Iraqi journalists to work freely as long as they limit themselves to covering Iraqi affairs and do not criticise the host countries. Finally, no organisation provides large-scale assistance or information to expatriate Iraqi journalists. They are all on their own when it comes to finding work or other means to survive.

Leaving Iraq at all cost

The reason for leaving are always more or less the same reason – an overwhelming sense of fear. Some leave after an attempted kidnapping or murder. Threats are enough for others.

A fairly typical case was that of an Iraqi journalist who left a job with a US news agency in Baghdad because another journalist had been threatened and a driver had been killed. “I was afraid,” he said. “I told myself it would be safer to work for another news organisation. I had worked for them for 16 months. But then they asked me for a piece of paper from the Iraqi authorities that said I worked as a journalist and paid my taxes in Iraq. It was

too risky. No one knew I worked as a journalist. I did not want a state employee to use this information against my family or me. I refused, and I changed job. I worked for another news media for a year, then I came to Jordan to join my family. I had sent them here for their safety in September 2007. Working in Iraq has become impossible. There is too much tension, too many difficulties. Now I am unemployed.”

Some journalists decide to leave above all to protect their family and to ensure that their children can go to school normally. They all say it became harder and harder to work as a journalist. **Hassan Hafidh** used to be the *Reuters* bureau chief in Baghdad. He has been living in Jordan for a year. He concealed his profession during his last three years in Iraq, before deciding to leave for good.

“I was kidnapped for eight hours in August 2003,” he said. “It was then that I stopped saying what I did for a living. I stopped carrying a laptop around with me and I spoke no English in public.” He left his job with the news agency, although he had a senior position, and went to work for another news organisation. But things became so dangerous in 2006 that he decided to move to Amman. “It was no longer possible to work in Iraq. Aside from the problems of power cuts, it took hours to cover short distances and we were gripped by fear whenever we had to return home.”

In some cases, it suddenly becomes imperative to leave at once. The life of the Spanish news agency *EFE*'s correspondent was turned upside by a visit to the neighbourhood baker's. He noted a number of identical small posters on the wall, automatically began reading one and was stunned to discover his name. “There were

23 names on the poster,” he said. “I remember it very well. My name was 17th. It was in February 2007.” The poster was just a list of 23 names. It said nothing else. But the neighbourhood was controlled by Al-Qaeda. He decided to leave immediately with his wife and two children. They all left for the Syrian capital of Damascus. It was hard to make his employer understand. *EFE* insisted that he return to Baghdad. He had to resign.

A woman journalist we spoke to survived a murder attempt and an abduction in 2006. Her kidnappers let her go only because she promised to stop working as a journalist. She had also received threatening emails containing such messages as: “Death to spies, to those who betray the people, to those who are agents of the Persians [the Iranians]!” She decided to leave Baghdad in July 2006.

Working as a journalist in Irak means being exposed. People scrutinise what you write. Your equipment may betray who you are. Your surname, an indicator of your probably religion, may attract enemies. Saad, who has been a cameraman for more than 10 years, had a good job. “I have a Sunni name and the militias know me,” he said. “I decided to leave the day I was told that people were asking about me in my neighbourhood.” Another cameraman had a similar experience. “I learned in May 2007 that the Mahdi Army was asking questions about me in my neighbourhood,” he said, referring to a Shiite militia led by Moqtada al Sadr that is involved in ethnic cleansing in mixed neighbourhoods in Baghdad. “I am a journalist. I worked for a US TV station and I am Sunni. So I was a target for them. I decided at once to leave the city. I went to Syria.”

Hussein Al Maadidi incurred the wrath of

the Iraqi authorities and US military. It was thanks to his many contacts in the western province of Al Anbar that the US media learned of the Haditha massacre of November 2005, in which US marines deliberately shot women and children in reprisal for the killing of a marine by an explosive device. Before admitting the massacre, the US military claimed the victims were killed by the bomb or when the marines returned fire. “The police searched my home 23 times,” Maadidi said. “I never went home during the last two years. I even worked under another name to avoid police reprisals. My articles about what is really happening in the west of the country upset them.” He left Iraq in October 2007.

Iraqi journalists are often torn between the desire to move their family to safety and the need to earn money. After one of his sons was killed and the other was threatened, a print media journalist sent his wife and surviving son to Syria. He and his family were separated for several years. Last year, he managed to get a job in Amman and he had his family move to Jordan.

Going into exile is not a professional choice. Pushed or forced, Iraqi journalists often have to abandon good jobs in order to find refuge. Leaving is a question of survival

Crossing borders

Once the decision to leave has been taken, a way has to be found to enter another country. Syria introduced an obligatory entry visa for Iraqis in 2007. It costs about 50 dollars. Jordan virtually closed its border in mid-2006 and also plans to introduce an obligatory visa for Iraqi citizens. Crossing the frontier is not easy for Iraqis. It is not unusual to find Iraqis

who have tried several times at the same border crossing, or who have tried to enter several different countries.

A young print media journalist we spoke to went to Syria, but did not manage to live off his work. So he decided to go to Amman from Damascus for a trial with *Baghdad TV*. But Jordan was now letting hardly any Iraqis into the country, except businessmen and patients coming for treatment in hospitals in Amman. “My future employer was not in a position to write a letter of recommendation for me,” he said. “But I tried anyway, and it worked.” The fact that he was a journalist and a Sunni may have worked in his favour.

The luckiest ones are those with a letter from a western or Iraqi employer. This was the case with a print media journalist who left Baghdad with a letter from his previous employer, *The Los Angeles Times*. “Thanks to this letter, and the fact that I am Sunni and not Shiite, I was able to enter easily,” he said. “But I was nonetheless very afraid and my heart was racing.” Such letters prove to the authorities that the person carrying them is going to be able to work and earn enough to live. They are invaluable for opening doors. Others have been able to cross the border by showing immigration officers evidence that they had been threatened. In many cases, having already sent their family to Syrian or Jordan made it easier for the journalist to get into the country later, and to get a temporary visa. They are then free to stay in the country, even without permission.

Once across the border, Iraqi refugees are in an illegal situation after a few weeks – exactly how long depends on the length of their visa. Jordan does not issue temporary visitor visas to Iraqi refugees. Those who

are registered with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees can show their registration card in the event of a police check, but that does not eliminate the risk of being expelled.

Jordan and Syria are the most accessible countries for Iraqi journalists who are forced to flee. But many prefer to put more distance between themselves and the groups threatening them. Many Iraqi journalists exiled in neighbouring countries try to get visas to go to Europe or the United States. Often without success. Getting a visa for a Schengen-area country in Europe has become virtually impossible. The western countries have opted to provide financial help to the main host countries such as Syria and Jordan, rather than take Iraqi refugees themselves. The situation is no better in the United States. According to a recent statement by the US ambassador to Iraq, James Foley, only 3,040 Iraqis have made it to the United States under a refugee aid programme launched in 2007.

Reporters Without Borders has helped more than 30 Iraqi journalists seeking refuge in Europe since the start of the war in March 2003. They have been given legal and financial assistance to enable them to take up residence in a safe country and obtain protected status. The French foreign ministry granted political asylum visas to two Iraqi journalists supported by Reporters Without Borders at the start of 2007. But the ministry of immigration, integration, national identity and co-development refused in October 2007 to issue asylum visas requested by Reporters Without Borders for four Iraqi journalists. A similar visa was nonetheless granted at the same time to an Ethiopian journalist.

A ministry official told Reporters Without Borders the government did not want to

encourage more Iraqi applicants. But France has many fewer Iraqi asylum applicants than other European countries. Around 20,000 Iraqis requested asylum in one of the European Union's 27 member countries in the first quarter of 2007, including 9,300 in Sweden, 3,500 in Greece and just 63 in France.

Daily struggle

All the journalists interviewed expressed their relief at having managed to get to Jordan or Syria and live there. They are in a safe country, where they do not fear for their lives. They have left fear behind them. But starting over in a new country is not easy.

Iraqi refugees in Jordan do not have residence permits and journalists are no exception to the rule. Persons in an illegal situation are supposed to pay a daily fine of 1.5 dinars per person (about 1.5 euros or 2 dollars) at a police station, if they want to avoid problems at any police check. At the start of this year, Jordanian interior minister Eid Fayez said Iraqis in an irregular situation would no longer have to pay the fines if they left the country for good. Meanwhile, a family with two children has to pay 6 dinars a day, or 180 a month. "I must pay 6 dinars every day," a freelance journalist said. "One has the impression that we are not welcome here. I have decided to leave. I want to try my luck in another country such as the United States." He is awaiting a reply from the International Organisation for Migration.

Not having a residence permit also means not being able to obtain a work contract. Many refugee journalists in Jordan can only dream of having a residence permit. The only Iraqi journalists who are currently issued residence permits by the Jordanian authorities are those working for

Iraqi media that are officially recognised as having an operational base in Jordan or those working for foreign news agencies such as *Agence France-Presse*, *Associated Press* or *Reuters*.

Furthermore, Iraqi journalists who want to leave Jordan, or want to leave and come back, have to have a secured "G" or "H" passport. Older "S" passports are regarded as unreliable and are no longer accepted by foreign embassies. Some of the journalists Reporters Without Borders met were unable to travel out of the country to cover certain events such as an oil conference in Vienna or a conference on Iraqi refugees in Geneva because of such problems with their identity papers.

Getting a visa for Europe does not necessarily mean an end to all the possible pitfalls. In France, for example, Iraqi journalists have to obtain the approval of the French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons (OFPRA). So far, none of them have had their requests rejected but some have been awaiting a response for a long time. One is a former Baghdad newspaper employee who was threatened by the Mahdi Army and is now being assisted by Reporters Without Borders. He managed to enter Europe in 2006 with a false French passport and is currently staying at the Home for Journalists in Paris, a reception centre and residence for exiled journalists. He is still hoping to be granted refugee status, which would allow him to send for his family. He has not seen his wife and children for two years.

Tough work situation

Earning a living from their profession is another challenge for refugee journalists. Some have abandoned journalism for a job with one of the UN agencies or NGOs

whose work involves Iraq. The luckiest ones have been hired by a foreign news agency or newspaper. They are the ones who can get the valuable Jordanian residence permit and, above all, a good salary (1,000 to 1,500 dollars a month).

The cost of living in Jordan is not at all cheap. Inflation is about 10 per cent a year and the Iraqi refugee influx has driven up rents. The monthly rent of an average furnished apartment now ranges from 200 to 500 dinars (300 to 600 dollars). The cost of living is much cheaper in Syria, even if the arrival of more than a million refugees has pushed up rents there too.

The situation of an Iraqi journalist who had a good job in Baghdad and was paid in dollars is typical of many refugees. In Iraq, he earned more than 2,000 dollars a month and rented his own house. He joined his family in Amman at the end of 2007 and is still without work. Five of them are currently living off his father's savings. Another example is an Iraqi journalist who left his job with a European news agency in Baghdad after being threatened. He first went to Syria, where he just managed to survive on odd jobs for a news website. Then he went to Jordan to work for an Iraqi news organisation. He has gone from 1,800 dollars a month in Iraq to 500 dollars a month in Jordan. And he has to pay 300 dollars a month in rent for his wife and children in Syria. He had to take a second job in a library.

Even more disturbing is the case of an Iraqi woman journalist working in Amman for a Jordanian electronic news media. She is on standby from 7:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. in case something happens, and for this she is paid 200 dinars a month, the same as the rent for her apartment. She manages with help from a few friends who pay her electricity and gas bills, and she is

desperately seeking another job. She was a well-known and well-paid journalist in Iraq who had to give up everything after being kidnapped. To help get by in Jordan, she has sold her gold jewels and spent all her savings. Now she has nothing left. To make things worse, her Jordanian employer does not pay her regularly. She told Reporters Without Borders she was not paid as much as Jordanian journalists doing the same job.

Refugee journalists in Europe receive a monthly allowance of up to 400 euros. The chances of getting subsidised housing are limited and many are hard put to find privately-owned rental accommodation. Landlords are reluctant to rent to foreigners with no financial guarantees. Requests for local authority housing are just as unlikely to be successful as waiting lists are long.

Maadidi, the reporter who exposed the Haditha massacre, is bitter about being a refugee in Syria. "My income has fallen from 2,000 dollars a month to 200," he said. "I sold my car in Baghdad. My family, which stayed behind in Iraq, has to send me money. All the news agencies and TV stations I used to work for regularly in Iraq no longer use me. It is true there is little news in Syria."

TV producer **Mohamed Al Kakhi** is also bitter. He has applied for many journalist jobs in Damascus. As he is short of money, he has also looked for work as a translator, but again without success. He has been in Syria for nine months and does not know how he is going to get by. Ahmad, a 25-year-old cameraman who worked for the US TV network *NBC*, is even more pessimistic. He was kidnapped twice in Iraq and then got a message that described him as an agent of the occupier. That is when he decided to leave for Syria. He has

been there for a year with his family. He is spending out 600 dollars a month but has only managed to work twice as a cameraman. He is living off his scant savings.

In Jordan, Iraqis do not normally have access to jobs as journalists with local media. To hire an Iraqi, an employer has to prove the job cannot be filled by a Jordanian journalist. It is very hard to go against the rule that says nationals must be hired, as an Iraqi cameraman with 10 years of experience found to his chagrin. He was hired by Jordan's first privately-owned TV station, *ATV*. When his employer applied for a residence permit on his behalf, the interior ministry refused. He was told: "This is a Jordanian TV station, so you cannot work for it. These jobs must go to Jordanians." He was nonetheless paid for a year although the station did not start operating for lack of a broadcast licence.

A freelance journalist working in Syria and Jordan admitted that he is not registered as a journalist in either country. His wife is in Syria, and he uses that as a pretext for going there. In Jordan, he works quite regularly for English-language magazines without ever having been bothered by the authorities.

Nabil Al Sahrif, the editor of the Jordanian daily *Al Dustour*, acknowledges that few Iraqi journalists manage to work for Jordanian media, but he points out that there are also lots of young Jordanian journalists without work. "If I have to choose between an Iraqi journalist and a Jordanian journalist, I choose a Jordanian even if I understand and sympathise with the difficulties our Iraqi neighbours are undergoing," he said. "If I must choose between a brother and a cousin, I choose my brother." Jordanian universities, on the other hand, have hired many Iraqi

researchers and professors.

Those without a regular job pin almost all their hopes on the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the possibility of being resettled in a third country. Saad, a cameraman who worked for a US network, has already had several interviews with the UNHCR and hopes to get a US visa. The same goes for Ahmad, 25, a cameraman who has been registered with the UNHCR in Syria for the past year. "I don't know what to do, so I am waiting," he said. "I have no prospects here. I have had seven interviews with the UNHCR but so far without a response." Maadidi is in a similar situation. "Iraq is finished for me," he said. "I am afraid of the Iraqi police. They are looking for me. I have applied to the UNHCR and I have an appointment in April. We will see."

Only a very small proportion of exiled journalists in Europe manage to keep working in journalism. **Ahmed Al-Allef**, who was a fixer for many foreign news media including the Paris-based daily *Le Monde*, wants to go back to studying journalism with the long-term goal of working for a French news organisation. He says he is aware of all the difficulties he is facing. "I have lost my home, my car and my savings," he told Reporters Without Borders. "My family is spread over the four corners of the globe. Nonetheless, I want to start a new life and I am doing my best to achieve it by learning French." Supported by leading European news media, he managed to obtain refugee status in seven months.

Reporting without upsetting one's hosts

Covering news in the Middle East is sensitive at the best of times and governments do not like criticism. But Iraqi journalists in Jordan and Syria seem

to be free to cover what they want and say what they want. *Al Irakiya* journalist **Jalil Bane** was very definite about it. “There is no control over our stories by the Jordanian authorities,” he said. “None of my reports was ever censored.” This appears to be the general rule. The Iraqi media enjoy a fair amount of freedom. But they know they cannot cross the Rubicon, they cannot criticise the king of Jordan. That constitutes lese-majeste in Jordan and it is punishable by three years in prison. It applies to the entire royal family. You can also be prosecuted for criticising the government. And no criticism of the government is tolerated in Syria either. That is the red line you do not cross if you do not want problems.

Conclusions and recommendations

Returning to Iraq is for the time being unthinkable for the journalists who have left the country. They have no guarantees that they would not be singled out again by the different armed groups, which are all still active. The situation is even more appalling for the journalists who have stayed behind. Five years after the start of the war, they are still targets. Everyone recognises that Iraqi journalists are threatened by armed groups, but getting visas for other countries has not been made any easier for them. It is incomprehensible that certain western governments have failed to respond as the toll of journalists killed increases

Syria and Jordan appear overwhelmed by the influx of Iraqi refugees. The countries of Europe, North America and the rest of the Arab world should also accept Iraqi refugees and should urgently adopt policies to make this possible. The US state department has for the past few months been approving visas for journalists who worked for US media and who have been

threatened or kidnapped because they worked for the “occupier.” This is a significant advance, but we urge the US government to expand its criteria and to consider applications from all threatened journalists, regardless of the nationality of the media they worked for.

The UNHCR must facilitate the rapid resettlement of journalists. The conference on Iraqi refugees, organised by Jordan this month with Iraq, the leading G8 countries and the UN attending, must lead to concrete measures aimed at finding a just solution to the problem of Iraqi refugees.

Finally, the authorities must do more to combat the impunity prevailing in Iraq, regardless of all the real difficulties already encountered. The Iraqi press is freer than it ever was under Saddam Hussein, but it is exposed to an unprecedented degree of danger. No independent press can survive in a country that is as deadly for journalist as Iraq.