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Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Effective investigation needed into killing of journalist

Amnesty International has called on the authorities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KR-I) to ensure that the investigation into the killing of journalist Wedat Hussein Ali on 13 August 2016 in the northern city of Dohuk is thorough, independent and impartial.

Wedat Hussein Ali's relatives collected his body, bearing what appeared to be marks of torture, from the Dohuk hospital morgue on 13 August. The KR-I authorities indicated on 15 August that an investigation would be opened. This should be carried out by an impartial body with measures that guarantee the security of witnesses and lead to the findings being disclosed.

According to testimonies gathered by Amnesty International from his relatives, co-workers and other activists, Wedat Hussein Ali dropped off a relative as he was driving to work at around 9.30am on 13 August 2016. Witnesses reported seeing him being intercepted on the road by two regular cars in the Malta neighbourhood in the west of Dohuk. Three men in plain clothes forced him out of his car, put a bag put over his head, pushed him into one of their cars at gunpoint and then drove away. Witnesses told family members that the abductors said that the journalist was being arrested for running over a child. The witnesses informed the family that they had taken note of the model and number plates of the car and given the information to General Security (Asayish) officers.

Approximately two hours later, relatives were contacted by the Asayish in Dohuk, informing them that they had "an unwell relative in the hospital". Upon arrival at the hospital, the relatives were directed to the morgue, where they found the bruised body of Wedat Hussein Ali. Photos of Wedat Hussein Ali's body, taken at the morgue and shared with Amnesty International, show severe bruising to the head, torso and rest of the body, as well as deep lacerations to the head.

The Asayish in Dohuk informed the family that Wedat Hussein Ali's body had been found by villagers near Sumeil, a district west of the city of Dohuk, and that the villagers had informed the local police, who in turn alerted Asayish in Dohuk that "there was a body of a Dohuk resident" in their police station to be collected.

Relatives spoke to the village residents who found Wedat Hussein Ali and were told that he was alive and had given his name and address, before he was taken to the main police station in Sumeil. Wedat Hussein Ali's relatives and co-workers feel that there is a lack of clarity about the exact cause and time of Wedat Hussein's death. The doctors at the hospital refused to answer the family's questions as to the likely cause of Wedat Hussein Ali's injuries and death, asking them to wait for the official forensic report. Further, relatives are concerned that witnesses might have been intimidated as they appeared reluctant to convey any more details as to Wedat Hussein Ali's state when found.

Tareq Hussein Ali, the brother of Wedat Hussein Ali, told Amnesty International:

"His right hand and right foot were broken, his eyes were severely bruised, and his ribs were all broken. My brother had been beaten and tortured. He was taken at gunpoint in broad daylight and on a busy road in Dohuk during rush hour. How can the authorities allow this to happen? How can they have nothing to say?"

Family members and co-workers also informed Amnesty International that Wedat Hussein Ali had had previously received death threats on his phone and was questioned by the Asayish in Dohuk on several occasions. They said he was beaten during one interrogation. He told his family that he had been asked to either stop working as a journalist at the news agency RojNews or act as an informant for the Asayish. He had refused and continued to work there. Wedat Hussein Ali's co-workers at RojNews, which is considered to be pro-PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), also told Amnesty International that he was focusing on issues relating to the current political strife in the KR-I and that he had had video equipment in his car the day he was abducted.

On 15 August 2016, a [statement](#) from the office of the Kurdistan Region Presidency said that the president had "instructed the relevant institutions to investigate this incident, detain and hold the perpetrators accountable." Amnesty International is urging the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to ensure the investigation is impartial and thorough, to take effective measures to guarantee the security of witnesses, and to provide Wedat Hussein Ali's relatives with information on the status of the investigation and the steps taken, in line with international standards, including the [Principles on the Effective Prevention and Investigation of Extra-legal, Arbitrary and Summary Executions](#). The organization is concerned that crimes against journalists in Iraq, including in the KR-I, have largely gone unpunished in recent years.

Background

Journalists in Iraq, including to some extent in the KR-I, work in very difficult security conditions and the Committee to Protect Journalists has every year for the past decade ranked the country as one of the deadliest places in the world for journalists. Wedat Hussein Ali is one of many journalists in Iraq, including the KR-I, who have in recent years been targeted through threats, abduction and detention and, in many instances, killed for carrying out their work. Amnesty International has previously [called for the protection of journalists in Iraq](#), including the KR-I, and expressed concern at the lack of investigations carried out.

The KRG has on several occasions criticized the PKK and its actions. In August 2015, the KRG asked PKK to leave their bases in the Kandil mountains to prevent further civilian casualties after Turkish air strikes on a village [killed at least eight residents](#) and injured several more, despite the villagers not being affiliated with the PKK; Turkish air strikes on PKK targets inside Iraq have continued sporadically to date. Earlier this year, the KRG's Prime Minister criticized the PKK's actions in Turkey, where a bombing carried out on a pipeline transporting oil from the KR-I was claimed by the PKK, and has most recently blamed forces affiliated with the PKK for carrying out [destruction](#) in several villages in northern Iraq.