

URGENT ACTION

FREE JOURNALIST QAHRAMAN SHUKRI

Security forces in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KR-I) arrested journalist Qahraman Shukri on 27 January 2021. On 23 June 2021, the Duhok Criminal Court sentenced him to seven years in prison following a grossly unfair, secret trial. Before his arrest, Qahraman Shukri's journalism work was critical of Kurdish authorities' handling of Turkish air strikes in the KR-I. The Court of Cassation court upheld the seven-year sentence in October 2023. Qahraman Shukri's arrest is in the context of a wider crackdown by Kurdish authorities on the right to freedom of expression. He must be immediately and unconditionally released.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

President Nechervan Idris Barzani
President of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq
Erbil, Kurdistan Region of Iraq
Email: C/O dindar.zebari@gov.krd

Your excellency,

I am writing to demand the immediate and unconditional release of journalist Qahraman Shukri, who has been imprisoned since January 2021. Following his arrest, Qahraman Shukri was forcibly disappeared for more than four months. In June 2021, the Duhok Criminal Court sentenced him to seven years in prison in a grossly unfair, secret trial, and in October 2023, the Court of Cassation upheld his conviction and sentence. Before his arrest, Qahraman Shukri's journalism work was critical of Kurdish authorities' handling of the impact on people of Turkish airstrikes in the province of Sulaimaniyah in the KR-I.

According to Qahraman Shukri's family, on 27 January 2021, the Asayish, the KR-I Government's primary security and intelligence agency, raided Qahraman Shukri's family home in the Duhok governorate. After kicking down the front door, the Asayish dragged Qahraman Shukri from his bed and took him into custody. He was forcibly disappeared for four months, until his family received a phone call from the Asayish informing them that he was detained at Zerka Prison in Duhok. When his family visited him for the first time in May 2021, Qahraman Shukri told them that security forces had beaten him, and that he had confessed to crimes he did not commit because he was scared and wanted to make the beatings stop. He was not allowed legal representation for the duration of his interrogation and the investigation.

Qahraman Shukri's family were unaware of the trial until they learned about it from him in a visit to the prison. The Duhok Criminal Court convicted him on charges of joining and spying for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), an organization engaged in conflict with Turkey which has bases in the northern areas of the KR-I, and sharing material with them. The court appointed him a lawyer for his trial in front of the Duhok Criminal Court, however he was not allowed to choose his own lawyer, nor given adequate time and facilities to prepare a defence. Qahraman Shukri told his brother he was unaware of the trial until he was transported suddenly in a security vehicle to the Duhok Criminal Court. The Court of Cassation upheld the ruling on 12 October 2023 on the basis of his confessions, which he says were extracted under duress.

I urge you to immediately and unconditionally release Qahraman Shukri, respect the right to freedom of expression and ensure that journalists are able to freely do their job without fear of arbitrary arrest, prosecution and imprisonment.

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Amnesty International reviewed a copy of the court documents from Qahraman Shukri's trial on 23 June 2021 as well as the verdict from the Court of Cassation on 12 October 2023. He was convicted on charges of "joining an unlicensed organization in the [Kurdistan] region, cooperating with it, and spying for its benefit on the security and party apparatuses, the Peshmerga [armed forces of the KR-I government] forces, and the internal security forces" as well as "transmitting audio recordings of officials in the region to members of the organization as well as elements supportive of the organization, and capturing pictures and video clips of Peshmerga and security services locations, and sending them to the banned organization."

Qahraman Shukri was convicted on the basis of violating Law no 21 of 2003 issued by the Parliament of the Kurdistan Region which states that "anyone who, in any manner, deliberately commits an act with the intent to prejudice the security, stability and sovereignty of the institutions of the Kurdistan Region – Iraq, and which produces the intended effect, shall be liable to imprisonment for life or for a fixed term." Before his arrest, his work had criticized inaction by the KR-I authorities with regards to Turkish strikes on KR-I territory.

Amnesty International has documented a trend of repression by the Kurdistan Regional Government and violations of the right to freedom of expression including by detaining and prosecuting journalists on spurious charges and sentencing them in unfair trials. One month after Qahraman Shukri's arrest, on 16 February 2021, the Erbil Criminal Court sentenced five other journalists and activists to six years imprisonment in a grossly unfair trial on similar charges including: "spying on account of foreign actors; of having supplied the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) with sensitive information; placing the lives of senior Kurdistan regional authorities and foreign officials at risk by gathering information about them; and collecting arms with the intention of supplying them to an unidentified armed group." Amnesty International reviewed a copy of the verdict which also stated that all five men were sentenced to prison based on the provisions of Article 1 of Law No. 21 of 2003.

The trial in 2021 of the five activists and journalists was also marred by serious violations of the right to a fair trial, including allegations of torture that were not investigated, the use of torture-tainted confessions to convict the defendants, and a refusal allow defence lawyers timely access to the case files. On 2 March 2022, Nechirvan Barzani, President of the KRG, reduced the sentences of the five journalists and activists. Qahraman Shukri's case was not included in the commutations. Three of the five detainees were released in March of 2023. In the case of two others, both journalists, as their release dates became imminent, the prosecution charged them with additional spurious crimes intended to keep them behind bars. One journalist has since been released. Before their arrest, their journalism focused on human rights, freedom of expression and anti-corruption issues in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: Kurdish, Arabic and English.
You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 19 June 2024.
Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PREFERRED PRONOUN: Qahraman Shukri (He/him).