

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## PUBLIC STATEMENT

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### **Iraq must protect journalists**

Amnesty International strongly condemns the killing of journalist Mohammad Bdaiwi al-Shammari and urges the Iraqi authorities to do their utmost to ensure that media workers conduct their work without fear of reprisal, intimidation and death. The organization is also concerned by a statement made by the Iraqi Prime Minister in reaction to the killing.

On 22 March, Mohammad Bdaiwi al-Shammari, the Baghdad Bureau Chief for Radio Free Iraq and a university professor, was shot dead by a member of the Kurdish Presidential Guards in Baghdad after apparently being denied access to the presidential complex, which led to an argument. The guard apparently fled the scene but was later arrested. Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki reacted to the killing by saying: "It will be my responsibility to avenge this killing, and blood can only be atoned by blood," as he arrived at the scene of the shooting. Amnesty International considers such a statement an utter disregard to the rule of law and urges the authorities to ensure that the killer of Mohammad Bdaiwi al-Shammari receives a fair trial according to international standards and without recourse to the death penalty.

The Prime Minister's statement angered politicians in both Baghdad and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and heightened ethnic tensions between Arabs and Kurds. Some Iraqi politicians called for the expulsion of the Kurdish Presidential Guards from Baghdad.

One day after this attack, the Iraqi Journalist Union reported the attempted murder of Raji Hamad Allah, editor at the Iraqi Media Network in Babil, after an armed group shot at him while he was driving to his office.

Journalists in Iraq, including the Kurdistan Region of Iraq work in very difficult and life threatening conditions on a daily basis. Fourteen journalists have been killed in Iraq in the past six months, four of them in 2014. Others, have been threatened, detained and killed in the past years for carrying out their work.

In December 2013, Iraqi TV presenter Nawras al-Nuaimi was shot dead by unknown gunmen near her home in Mosul. She covered women and youth issues for al-Mosuliya TV.

In the same month, Kurdish journalist Kawa Muhammad Ahmad Garmyani was shot dead outside his house in Kalar, in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, by gunmen who fled the scene. He had investigated and published articles on corruption in the autonomous region and had received threats in previous years in connection with his work.

No investigation is known to have taken place into these killings. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) has ranked Iraq as one of the top countries with complete impunity for the murder of journalists, with dozens of cases of journalist deaths unresolved. The lack of investigation into these killings perpetuates a culture of impunity and exposes journalists to further threats.

Both the Iraqi government and Kurdistan Regional Government have a responsibility to ensure that a prompt and immediate investigation is carried out into all killings of journalists and that those found responsible are brought to justice in fair trial proceedings without recourse to the death penalty.

Meanwhile, the Iraqi government continues to place restrictions on freedom of expression. In April 2013, the Iraqi Communications and Media Council (CMC) decided to suspend the licences of 10 satellite TV channels to operate in Iraq, including al-Jazeera and al-Sharqiya because the council considered those channels' broadcasts incitement to violence. Those restrictions which were disproportionate, violated the rights to freedom of expression and the press.

Similarly, those who dare to speak out or criticize the authorities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq have been intimidated and imprisoned. Niaz Aziz has been in detention since his arrest on 5 January 2012 for allegedly leaking information on rigged elections in Erbil, Sulaymania and Dohok. According to his lawyer and family, Asayesh Ghesti, the security intelligence of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, refused to take Niaz Aziz to court to stand trial.

On 3 March Shwan Saber Mustafa Gardi, a member of the Office of the Public Prosecution in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, was arrested and detained on defamation charges for expressing views critical of the courts and denouncing corruption in the justice system in Kurdistan on his Facebook page. He was released on bail on 6 March after paying 5 million Iraqi Dinars (approximately 4300 US dollars). If convicted, he could risk up to five years in prison.