

The Ongoing Assassinations of Iraqi Activists

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Ali Al-Mikdam is an Iraqi writer, journalist and human rights activist interested in Iraqi affairs, gender equality, Iraqi-Iranian politics relations, and pro-Iranian militias in Iraq. He is concerned with victims of forced disappearance and their rights. Due to his opinions he was arrested twice and abducted by unknown militia.



Brief Analysis

Starting in early October 2019, when Iraq witnessed a swell of large protests in the capital, Baghdad, along with other cities in the south, protesters were violently repressed—the harshest crackdown on protesters since the downfall of Saddam’s regime in 2003.

Ehab al-Wazni was walking near his home in Karbala in the early hours of May 9 when masked gunmen on a motorcycle opened fire at him, killing him on the spot. With this, Ehab—who coordinated the anti-regime protests in his hometown of Karbala—joined the growing number of Iraqi activists who have been assassinated by pro-Iranian militias since the start of the October 2019 protest movement.

Starting in early October 2019, when Iraq witnessed a swell of large protests in the capital, Baghdad, along with other cities in the south, protesters were violently repressed—the harshest crackdown on protesters since the downfall of Saddam’s regime in 2003. Rather than from Iraq’s political leadership or security forces, much of this crackdown stemmed from Iranian-backed militias, rather than Iraq’s political leadership or security forces.

One day after the outbreak of anti-government protests in Iraq in October 2019, Qassem Soleimani, the commander of the Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), arrived by helicopter at the heavily fortified Green Zone in Baghdad, where he surprised a group of senior security officials headed by the meeting, instead of the prime minister. "We in Iran know how to deal with protests," he promised. Indeed, following that crucial meeting, Iranian-backed Iraqi militias began actively targeting protests and activists playing a leading role in organizing and publicizing them. Snipers deployed by these militias have killed hundreds of protesters. Since then, while the Iraqi government has not apprehended any of the **perpetrators of the dozens of assassinations** (https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/iraq-militia-assassinations-fear/2021/05/12/501474c0-b1cc-11eb-bc96-fdf55de43bef_story.html), protesters point the finger directly at Iranian-backed Iraqi militias.

The assassination of Soleimani and al-Muhandis led to an escalation of tensions between the United States and Iran, which has repeatedly pledged to avenge Soleimani's death. In addition to a missile strike on the Ayn al-Assad base on January 8, 2020 that caused minor injuries to 110 American servicemen and women, Iranian-backed militias have stepped up their rocket attacks on American bases and diplomatic compounds. Yet Iran, unable to retaliate in equal force to the assassination of its top commanders in Iraq by the United States and fearful of a growing movement against Iranian influence, has turned instead to hunting down Iraq's vulnerable activist class.

Many activists in Iraq see Iran's focus on protesters as increasing substantially after the United States assassinated Qasem Soleimani and the senior pro-Iranian militia commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in early January 2020. In the three months prior to the assassination, the protest movement saw only five activists assassinated, along with nine additional assassination attempts. In contrast, in the three months after the assassination, the number of assassinated activists jumped to eleven along with an additional eleven assassination attempts. The number of assassinated journalists, activists, and opponents of the Iraqi authorities' policies since reached **at least 36** (<http://ihchr.iq/index.php?name=News&file=article&sid=4129>), according to the Committee to Protect Journalists and the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Referring to the assassination of Soleimani, Iraqi activist Nour al-Qaisi explained: "after the airport incident, there was a step up in the assassinations of activists and journalists. Before the October 2019 protest movement, those targeted were a limited number of journalists and activists who shed light on highly sensitive topics affecting the interests of militias or political parties." These activists and journalists largely hailed from Sunni-majority areas and after receiving threats, had to flee abroad. However, at the time, "Iraqi public opinion did not pay much attention to these cases because Iraqi militias and their leaders, such as Muhandis and Soleimani, claimed that those targeted belonged to ISIS."

Ziad al-Assad, an activist from the major protest hub of al-Nasiriya, argued that "the killing of Soleimani and al-Muhandis on Iraqi lands resulted in activists paying the price for a conflict between two competing axes of power," as the pro-Iran camp claims that the protest movement is being orchestrated by the United States. While the pro-Iranian militias, politicians, and their media outlets are unable to offer any credible evidence, they have been able to convince the rank-and-file of these militias that the protesters are foreign agents who need to be dealt with accordingly.

Intimidation Ahead of Elections

With the approach of early Iraqi parliamentary elections scheduled for October 10, 2021, Iraqi activists have likewise been increasingly subjected to assassinations and threats. Head of the Lawyers Syndicate Ali Al-Hamami was killed in the Al-Shatrah neighborhood after unknown persons stormed his house on January 8, and the same day, activist Dr. Haider Yasser was found dead in the city Nasiriyah, Dhi Qar Governorate. Two activists from the governorate of Dhi Qar were subsequently assassinated and about 30 activists, including a journalist, were arrested between January 8 and 9, according to the Iraqi High **Commission for Human Rights** (<http://ihchr.iq/index.php?name=News&file=article&sid=4129>).

"Most of the parties that dominate the political process maintain militias outside of state control," said Ziad al-Assad, the 25-year-old activist from al-Nasiriya. But he also added that even forces officially operating under the state have been infiltrated by the militias over the past seventeen years.

The assassinations appear to be intended not just to cow the protest movement and end the popular mobilization, but also hinder the ability of the protest movement to offer a political alternative to the country's ruling parties. Al-Assad believes that the assassinations and kidnappings of protesters, particularly in Nasiriyah, are intended to derail the establishment and stymie the work of the political movement that is now taking place in the city. Nasiriyah activists have been targeted in particular because the city's activists were able to produce two political entities that intended to participate in the upcoming parliamentary elections: al-Bait al-Watani and Imtidad.

While Imtidad remains in the running, a number of political parties withdrew from participating in the upcoming elections scheduled for next October, due to impunity, the spread of intrusive weapons, and the increase in **assassinations**

[https://www.aljazeera.net/news/politics/2021/5/16/%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%81-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%B5%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AF-%D8%AC%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%8D-%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D9%87%D9%84-%D8%AA%D8%AF%D9%81%D8%B9\)](https://www.aljazeera.net/news/politics/2021/5/16/%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%81-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%B5%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AF-%D8%AC%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%8D-%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D9%87%D9%84-%D8%AA%D8%AF%D9%81%D8%B9)).

Militias Seek to Reassert Control

The Iranian-backed political forces and militias lost much of their popular legitimacy in Iraq following the outbreak of the October 2019 wave of protests. The protesters explicitly called for a civil state and a political system no longer based on sectarian division, contrary to the vision advocated by the parties aligned with Iran. When the Iranian-backed militias responded to the peaceful protests with sniper fire, kidnappings and assassination, their reputation was further damaged. Nour al-Qaisi believes that following that reaction, Iraqis recognized that “the militias were ready to murder everyone if someone attempted to threaten the interests of Iranian influence in the region.”

On the first anniversary of the assassination of Soleimani and al-Muhandis, thousands flocked to Tahrir Square in Baghdad carrying posters of their slain leaders and chanting slogans demanding the removal of American forces in Iraq and revenge against the killers. During the protest, the participants and members of the Rubu Allah militia, a pro-Iranian group, vandalized murals of slain protesters such as those of prominent activist Safaa al-Saray. 26-year-old Al-Saray became an icon among supporters of the uprising and died after a tear gas canister cracked his skull while participating in the October 2019 protests.

“The militias’ targeting of journalists and protesters, as well as vandalizing of their murals in Baghdad and graves in Najaf following the killing of Soleimani and al-Muhandis, was an attempt to re-impose their authority that diminished after the killing of the two most important leaders of these militias,” argues al-Qaisi. They are trying, as she put it, to “spread terror and intimidate the Iraqi street by exploiting the lawlessness stemming from the weakness of the state.”

The Tishreen movement also poses another threat to militia groups: presenting a new iconography and image of who constitutes a “martyr.” Previously, the militias could cloak themselves in the glory of those fallen youth who died fighting against ISIS on behalf of the entire Iraqi people. Now, a new set of revolutionary, patriotic symbols and martyrs have emerged. As Ali Ahmed, a 27-year-old civil activist from Baghdad put it, “Just as they have monopolized positions and wealth, they want to monopolize the symbolism of martyrdom and patriotism for their leaders. The fact that the spotlight is on other martyrs scares them.”

In particular, the emergence of Safaa al-Sarayi as an international revolutionary symbol upset the supporters of the militias. As Ahmed put it, “they cannot understand how it is possible for any poor young man to turn into a national symbol, believing [instead] that one should belong to the family of the master and the Mujahid, or, as has become popular lately, have the title of “Haji”, to be a symbol and leader of the poor of this country.”

Social Media Incitement

Since the start of the October 2019 protest movement, the social networking platforms Telegram and Twitter have also been used to spread disinformation and incite violence against activists and journalists. Channels such as [Sabreen News](https://t.me/sabreenS1/796) (<https://t.me/sabreenS1/796>) and Al-Nahl Team, which are linked to Iran-funded Iraqi militia, publish information about the operations of these militias prior to any official announcements from the Iraqi government. These channels will also often accuse Iraqi activists of being part of a group of Iraqi protesters who resorted to throwing stones and occasionally Molotov cocktails in confrontations with security forces in Baghdad.

Out of the 36 activists and journalists assassinated since the start of the October 2019 uprising (IOHR data), searches of pro-Iranian channels on Telegram indicate that at least 21 were previously identified by name. Qasem, an Iraqi activist, fled his city for Erbil after his name and photo was circulated by pro-Iranian Telegram channels, accusing him of being a member of the “Joker gang”—militia terminology for the protesters, due to how some wear “Joker” masks to protect their identities. According to Qasem, the pro-Iranian channels legitimize killing activists and journalists by claiming that they are “[jokers \(https://t.me/E_Bees/6120\)](https://t.me/E_Bees/6120),” foreign agents and terrorists. Qasem added that “the Iraqi government and its security apparatus have been unable to bring an end to this online incitement, so how will it be able to reassert state control or end the threat of militias?”

Hussein Al-Moussawi, the pseudonym of one Iraqi who works for an Iranian Iraqi telegram channel, explained his perspective. Even as he claimed that protesters are foreign-backed, he professed loyalty to Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the former commander of the Iranian-backed Kataib Hezbollah. He likewise claimed that, “We will not forgive or turn a blind eye to anyone who transgresses or writes against our leaders, Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.” He insisted, however, that he would not support the killing of those who oppose his leaders, and would resort to legal and judicial methods to hold those who oppose them accountable.

Yet assassinations of activists against Iranian influence are ongoing. What has made matters worse is the COVID-19 lockdowns imposed

in Iraq, which increased the vulnerability of activists and journalists since the restrictions on movement within Iraq and to other countries made it difficult to escape to safer locations and away from the reach of the Iranian-backed militias. This drove many into silence, unable not only to participate in street protests but also even sharing their views online.

Hatem Jassim, a 19-year-old activist, commented “the pro-Iranian militias took advantage of the total curfew due to COVID-19 in central and southern Iraq to muzzle Iraqi youths protesting and opposing Iranian power and influence in Iraq. The militias took advantage of their ease of movement by using security identification cards” to avoid the lockdown restrictions while activists were trapped at home.

Even so, the violent repression of protests and the smaller number of participants they attracted due to COVID-19 lockdown, coupled with the threats emanating from Iranian-backed groups, still drove many activists to seek refuge. Hundreds of activists left their families and jobs and fled areas under the nominal control of the central Iraqi state. Sensing that the Iraqi state is powerless and unable to protect them, they have sought protection in the Kurdistan region of Iraq or abroad. The activists are keen to return to their homes and resume their activism on the ground, but currently do not feel they will be safe were they to do so.

Mustafa Saadoun, director of the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights, said that while the number of people who have fled due to threats and prosecutions is unknown, the number is likely significant, especially to the Kurdistan region and Turkey.

Ahmed Khaldoun, alongside fellow activists, established a shelter called the Safe House in Iraqi Kurdistan, which provides a space where Iraqi activists can live after fleeing. The initiative, financed entirely by private donations collected by the activists themselves, has housed 52 activists from central and southern Iraq for various periods until they are able to find their own accommodations. Khaldoun cautions that activists should not be counted on to continue finding solutions for themselves amid state dysfunction, and that their initiative requires support to make it sustainable.

The growing opposition among Iraqis to Iran’s influence is leading Iranian-backed militias to double down on repression to keep in place the political order that ensures their enrichment and power. While Iran’s supporters in Iraq present the protesters as powerful foreign-backed saboteurs, Western embassies in Baghdad have so far offered activists nothing but statements of concern about the violence meted out against them. Reform-inclined Iraqi politicians are clearly powerless to end the targeting of Iraq’s broad-based protest movement. Statements of concern and moral support alone will not stop bullets or even Telegram channels. Iraq’s best chance at reform, a mass cross-sectarian protest movement, is being killed off, driven underground, and into exile. ❖

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