

Iraq's "Resistance" Factions Shift to Major Crackdown on Media Spaces

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Brief Analysis

Part of a series: [Militia Spotlight \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight)

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Having stopped “resisting” U.S. forces (who shoot back), militias are focusing on unarmed activists in what appears to be a coordinated crackdown on freedom of expression.

Ever since Iraq's Tishreen protests of 2019, which the *muqawama* (resistance) brutally suppressed, Iranian-aligned militia groups have escalated their draconian campaign to silence any opposition in the media. Recent weeks have seen concerted attacks on anti-corruption campaigners by terrorist and militia factions in the judiciary, parliament, and government, echoed by *muqawama* media platforms.

Mobilizing the Judiciary



Figure 1a: Part 1 of Judge Aboud's letter threatening media figures with Baath-era laws.

On February 18, Federal Supreme Court chief Jassem Mohammed Aboud sent a letter to Iraqi president Abdul Latif Rashid stating, “The News Center on WhatsApp run by Mustafa Kamel and his group has positioned itself to evaluate government agencies and their caretakers...in a way that does not align with public order and ethics. He and those who partner with him make accusations and use

immoral words, including Yahya al-Kubaisi” (Figure 1a). The letter continues: “It has been noticed that some officials in sensitive state positions are participating in [this activity]...All of this violates Article 226 of Iraqi Penal Code No. 111 of 1969, which states, ‘Anyone who publicly insults the nation’s council [the parliament], government, courts, armed forces, organizational committees, public authorities, or official or semi-official offices...shall be punished by a sentence that does not exceed seven years’ imprisonment or a fine’...This court will take the necessary legal procedures about that” (Figure 1b).

The letter appeared to cast Aboud as the complainant *and* the judge for this issue. The document was published online, probably on purpose, and received praise from *muqawama* media, who no doubt hoped to intimidate activists and prevent them from appearing in the media or expressing their opinions on social media. More specifically, Aboud signaled that Article 226 of the Baath-era publishing law, which bans criticism of state organs, would be enforced on a more regular basis going forward.

The Prime Minister and Parliament Join the Attack

In recent years, Iraqis have become accustomed to the the [Communications and Media Commission \(CMC\) \(/node/17986\)](#)

banning activists from appearing on television based on accusations such as promoting Baathism or engaging with Israel. Prominent figures subjected to this censorship

include the aforementioned Yahya al-Kubaisi, along with Rabee al-Jawari, Alaa al-Nashoo, Omar Abdal-Sattar, Ahmed al-Abyad, and Imad Bajalan.

This year, however, Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani has begun to bring Article 226 cases against media commentators who criticize him personally:

- On January 14, Sudani was the complainant when Iraqi security forces arrested commentator Mohammed Nena (who is close to the Sadrist) for insulting the prime minister on television. Nena was released from prison on January 29 after tremendous media and public pressure accusing Sudani of being a dictator.
- On February 26, security forces arrested online influencer Yasser al-Jubouri at Baghdad Airport as he was leaving for Ireland, where he is a citizen. Here, too, the Prime Minister's Office was the complainant, claiming an Article 226 violation based on a (since-deleted)



Figure 1b: Part 2 of Judge Aboud's letter threatening media figures with Baath-era laws.



Figure 2: Abducted influencer Jubouri's family describes his disappearance.

comment that Jubouri tweeted about Sudan's nepotistic habit of placing his relatives into government offices. Notably, the complaint was issued immediately after [\(sites/default/files/2024-02/figure%20%20Jubouri%27s%20family%20explaining%20the%20circumstances%20if%20Jubouri%20refused%20to%20comply%20with%20an%20order%20from%20Sudan%27s%20media%20advisor%20Rabee%20Nader%20\(17736\)\)](#) demanding that he start working as an online surrogate for the Prime Minister's Office (Figure 2).

- On February 27, [Mohsen al-Mandalawi \(node/18601\)](#)—the acting speaker of parliament who is closely linked to the Iran-backed Badr Organization—made a similar move, ordering parliament's Legal Directorate to sue any person or institution who insults the legislature or its members (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Acting Speaker Mandalawi calls for lawsuits against anyone insulting parliament or its members.

Assassinating Commentators: Easy to Do, Hard to Mention in Iraqi Media

On February 22, Fakhari Karim, the head of al-Mada for Media, Culture, and Arts, survived an assassination attempt by an unidentified armed group in the gated community of Qadisiyah, Baghdad. The next day, editor-in-chief Ghassan Charbel of the leading foreign newspaper *Asharq al-Awsat* tweeted that Baghdad had become a “factory of assassinations.”

In response, Iraq's [al-Ahd TV \(node/17268\)](#), run by the U.S.-designated terrorist group [Asaib Ahl al-Haq \(node/16715\)](#), interviewed former Spokesman for the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces Abdul Karim Khalaf, who said that Charbel “must be sued...This shouldn't pass, the tweet is clear targeting” (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Abdul Karim Khalaf calls for a foreign editorial writer to be sued

A Clear and Disturbing Trend



Figure 5: A key strategist in the media crackdown, Prime Minister Sudan's media advisor and former Katab Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq journalist Rabea Nader. He was denied entry to the United States during the 2023 UN General Assembly in New York but arranged Sudan's meetings with U.S. officials at the February 2024 Munich Security Conference.

Article 226 of the old Baath Penal Code is being readied for widespread use against critics of the Sudanese government. In other words, a democracy that the United States helped build is planning to send its freedom of expression back to the era of brutal dictatorship. The Iran-backed terrorist groups and militias that control Sudan and his government are trying to snuff out all public criticism of abuses carried out by their personnel, the state organs they run, and even the prime minister himself.

These abuses and censorship efforts demand a significant international response, perhaps including U.S. postponement of Sudan's planned April visit to the White House.

Failing that, terrorist groups will conclude that they have a green light to shift their war against U.S. forces into a war against all those who oppose militia rule of Iraq. The U.S. military can protect itself, but unarmed Iraqi citizens cannot; they need international actors to stand up for them.



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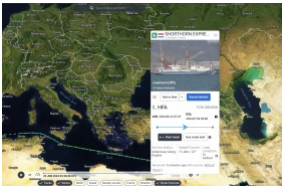
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